A TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH OF AMADOU KONÉ'S TRAITES, SOUS LE POUVOIR DES BLAKOROS [EXPLOITATION, UNDER THE BLAKOROS' POWER]

BY

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by

Dana Che Martin

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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In this dissertation, the author presents a translation of Amadou Koné's novel Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros, which is the first volume of a series published in 1980. In the novel, Koné depicts a corrupt post-independence society where certain native Africans, otherwise known as the "*blakoros*," exploit their fellow Africans mercilessly. Unlike those in the community who want to build the future on traditional values, the *blakoros* function rather on the basis of new and poorly mastered values established by Western societies. Koné, a writer from Côte d'Ivoire, is a defender of the oppressed and exploited masses, especially the peasant class, who have been betrayed by their fellow citizens in independent Africa.

Chapter 1, the introduction, presents the following: an examination of some important aspects of Côte d'Ivoire's history from the pre-colonial period to the twentieth century; Amadou Koné's life; an overview of the author's writing career; a comparison

of some themes and structures in Traites and Ahmadou Kourouma's Les Soleils des Indépendances; a study of Koné's fiction in relation to several texts written by some authors from his own generation; Koné's use of language in Traites; and, finally, the task of translating Traites into English. Chapter 2 is an interview with Amadou Koné. Among other things, the interview covers precise questions about translation, particularly of Traites.

Chapter 3 is the preface to Koné's novel. Chapters 4 and 5 offer the actual English translation of the novel. Finally, the dissertation includes a helpful glossary of all the foreign words and their respective languages. Some critics consider Koné to be a regional writer, which may explain why he has not yet been fully recognized as a major writer (one as important as Bernard Dadié, Camara Laye, Mongo Beti or Ahmadou Kourouma, for example). However, this dissertation confirms that his work merits more attention. The author hopes that her study will widen Amadou Koné's readership; and will stimulate scholarly interest in Ivoirian literature in North America (and, more generally, among English-speaking populations).

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF TRAITES, SOUS LE POUVOIR DES BLAKOROS

"[. . .] je parle des problèmes ivoiriens. Je suis donc un auteur ivoirien."
(Amadou Koné, Interview 1987)

Producing fiction designed to encourage questioning and to raise consciousness about his society, contemporary Francophone African author, Amadou Koné, stands as an important literary figure from Côte d'Ivoire.[1] Certainly Koné's narrative Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros [Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power], which depicts a peasant community faced with corruption and bribery in a post-independence society, can be placed within this category of fiction. A study of Amadou Koné's writing reveals that he is an example of the committed African writer who is extremely sensitive to the social and political problems of his day and is constantly coming to grips with them, hoping to play his part in changing society for the better.

This introduction to the English translation of Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros includes the following:

- An examination of some important aspects of Côte d'Ivoire's history from the precolonial period to the twentieth century
- Amadou Koné's life
- An overview of the author's writing career
- A comparison of the thematic content(s) in Koné's Traites and Ahmadou Kourouma's Les Soleils des Indépendances and of their respective structures

[1] In 1986, Ivoirian government announced "Côte d'Ivoire" as the official name of the country in all languages. Robert Mundt, Historical Dictionary of the Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire) (Metuchen-London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1987) xviii.

- A study of Koné's fiction in relation to several texts written by some authors from his own generation
- Koné's use of language in Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros
- The task of translating Traites into English

Côte d'Ivoire

Before European colonization, important kingdoms flourished in Côte d'Ivoire. Among these kingdoms (which were closely related linguistically and socially to the neighboring Asante kingdom) were the Abron, Anyi, Baule, Kong, and Sanwi (Mundt 5). The Asante, who founded the famous Asante Empire, were related to the Akan people; by the middle of the eighteenth century, this powerful empire practically dominated all of modern Ghana, along with parts of Côte d'Ivoire (Boahen 54). The Anyi and Baule were also Akan peoples; these two ethnic groups migrated into the forest region of Côte d'Ivoire. Smaller ethnic groups also inhabited Côte d'Ivoire along its coast.

France made its initial contact with Côte d'Ivoire in 1637 when missionaries landed at Assinie near the coast of what is today Ghana (Mundt 5). However, attempts at permanent settlement were greatly hindered by the inhospitable coastline and other conditions such as the oppressive climate and endemic diseases. In the eighteenth century, French and other European traders sought gold, ivory, and especially slaves, along the coast where trading posts were established. In 1843, the French began signing treaties with the local chiefs of the Grand-Bassam and Assinie regions, placing their territories under a French protectorate. Soon afterward, French explorers, missionaries, trading companies, and soldiers gradually gained control of the coastal areas and began to

move inland. French claims, however, were not matched by effective control over Côte d'Ivoire until the late nineteenth century.

Eventually, the French defined Côte d'Ivoire's borders, thereby solidifying control over the country. They were able to carry out this mission after the capture of the Muslim religious leader, Samory Touré.[2] Touré, a Malinke warrior chief who often came into conflict with French military expeditions, was against their expansion in West Africa. With his supporters, he resisted French penetration, but was finally captured after prolonged fighting in 1898 (Mundt 7). Six years later, Côte d'Ivoire became a constituent territory of the Federation of French West Africa and in 1908, Governor Gabriel Angoulvant began military occupation of the colony.

In the years to follow, Africans had to succumb to forced labor, which subsequently led to fierce resistance. Revolts broke out as France picked thousands of Africans from Côte d'Ivoire to serve as soldiers in World War I. However, the French overpowered these revolts and resistance efforts; and the Africans implicated were severely punished. By the end of the war, the French had concluded their conquest of Côte d'Ivoire. To secure their authority during the period of conquest, they subdued the African tribes and imposed a uniform, centralized administration. In the years between the two world wars, economic development in Côte d'Ivoire became the primary focus. Not only was a railroad completed to help with the colony's transportation infrastructure, but Africans also began planting cash crops, such as cocoa and coffee, for export (David 27).

[2] Koné's first play was about the great leader, Samory Touré. He titled the tragedy, Samory de Bissandougou. Unpublished.

Thousands of Côte d'Ivoire Africans fought for the French army in World War II. In fact, a significant number of Africans, in general, served France in the Second World War. According to Myron Echenberg,[3] "at a conservative estimate, the French recruited in excess of 200,000 black Africans during the Second World War" (88). This time, recruited African troops played a much more combatant role against Nazi Germany, which had territorial ambitions in Europe and Africa. Black Africans, as well as North Africans, made up an important part of the ranks in the French Army; altogether, they fought vigorously to defend France (Echenberg 88).

These soldiers, no doubt, were made to expect more after the war, not only because of the economic and social developments in the colonies, but also because of the suffering and hardships they had endured. As one officer noted:

> The man [African] at the war is being thrown in contact with Europeans in a way as never before. The returning African cannot be quite the same. They will have fought and lived side by side with foreigners, black and white. They received at any rate in the Middle East, the same food, the same clothing, they drank side by side in the canteens the same beer, they were fighting the same battle [. . .] they will have seen the world sufficiently to realise that they can have improved homes, better food, better conditions and better pay for work undertaken [. . .]. How are we going to keep them down on the farm after the war? (Boahen 142)

Upon their return home, Africans expected employment as well as adequate pensions and benefits, but a good number were sorely disappointed. Of course, this proved unfair for the returning soldiers, for "without the rank-and-file black African soldier, their [Free French forces] victories would have been impossible" (Echenberg 104).

During World War II, Côte d'Ivoire, like the rest of French West Africa, fell under the control of France's Vichy government. Under this authoritarian political system, numerous severe measures against the African population were established,

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[3] Colonial Conscripts: The *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* in French West Africa, 1857-1960.

oriented toward and deriving from economic exploitation and overt racism. The Vichy regime controlled Côte d'Ivoire and, basically, French West Africa until 1943 (Yansané 27). After the fall of the Vichy regime, Côte d'Ivoire became a territory in the *Union Française*. This political entity replaced the French colonial empire and inaugurated a number of governmental reforms, including giving Africans the right to organize politically and abolishing forced labor. In 1946, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, a politician and physician[4] born in Côte d'Ivoire, founded the *Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire* (P.D.C.I.). That same year, he also helped found the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (R.D.A.), the leading pre-independence interterritorial political party in French West Africa (David 32).

Côte d'Ivoire's political history is closely associated with the career of Félix Houphouët-Boigny. For many years, he represented Côte d'Ivoire in the French National Assembly, devoting much of his effort to interterritorial political organization and further improvement of labor conditions for African farmers. As a minister in the French government, Houphouët-Boigny also played a major role in drafting the 1956 Reform act, the *loi-cadre*, which established universal suffrage in the overseas territories and vested a number of powers in the elected territorial governments of French West Africa. In 1958, Côte d'Ivoire, along with many other French territories, joined the *Communauté Française* (formerly *L'Union Française*) under General Charles de Gaulle's leadership. Pressure, however, from the French colonies to achieve independence soon began to grow within the *Communauté*. As a result, de Gaulle offered full independence from

[4] Houphouët-Boigny graduated from the *École Normale William Ponty* in Dakar in 1925 as a medical doctor. He was one of the first of his ethnic group to complete the entire course of education under the colonial system (Mundt 82).

France to the African colonies in 1960. Côte d'Ivoire achieved full independence on August 7, 1960 and Félix Houphouët-Boigny was elected the country's first president (Mundt 11).

Political tensions were high during those first few years after Houphouët-Boigny's election as president. In fact, shifts in tactics and ideology by the *Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire* (P.D.C.I.) caused tensions to explode in what became referred to as the "events of 1963" (Mundt 12). Supposedly, a coup was in the works to overthrow the president; plotters certainly set out to challenge his authority. But all of their attempts failed and by the next election, Houphouët-Boigny's control was again secure.

Of all the former French colonies in Africa, Côte d'Ivoire was the only one that had the same president for more than three decades; Houphouët-Boigny was reelected president in 1965, 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, and 1990.[5] I asked Amadou Koné what he thought about the country's former president. He said:

> Houphouët-Boigny was not a democrat, that is, his system of government was not like the democracy that [I am] used to. It was not even a dictatorship. It was a personal power that had the advantage of giving a certain amount of freedom to the people and also, of functioning economically in spite of corruption. Alas, the governments that have followed Houphouët have not succeeded as well.[6]

While other African nations focused on industrialization, Houphouët-Boigny developed Côte d'Ivoire's cash-crop agriculture. As a result, the country became a primary exporter of goods, principally cocoa and coffee; in 1977, it was the world's largest producer of cocoa (Mundt xviii). Philippe David acknowledges the peasant community in Côte

[5] Félix Houphouët-Boigny was born on October 18, 1905 in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire. He was known respectfully as "le Vieux" [the Old Man] by his compatriots. Houphouët-Boigny died in Côte d'Ivoire on December 7, 1993. Under his leadership, Côte d'Ivoire became one of the most prosperous nations in Sub-Saharan Africa. La Côte d'Ivoire, pp. 38, 45.

[6] My translation from the French. Interview with Amadou Koné, 2002.

d'Ivoire for playing an instrumental role in the success of the country's agricultural economy. According to this scholar:

> [. . .] farmers were, and still are, an essential strength for the country [. . .]. Houphouët will always show, what he has admitted to calling, his "*profonde sollicitude*" to all planters [of coffee and cocoa, pineapples, cotton, and sugar cane] food-producing farmers, stockbreeders, fishermen, and rural artisans, the backbone of a country that, on this level, has always asserted itself as certainly different from its neighbors. Even if the "important CEOs" of Abidjan sometimes grew more and more distant from the low-ranking planters who, nonetheless, provide the basic essentials of their prosperity, one will see that numerous personal and financial ties continue to unite one to the other.[7]

Koné's focus on Africa's peasantry is, therefore, a timely one. Undoubtedly, the presence of this group in Côte d'Ivoire was important, especially to Houphouët-Boigny who, along with the peasant class, made agriculture the backbone of Côte d'Ivoire's economy (David 54, 1st ed.).

The characters, particularly in Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros, are farmers who plant coffee and cocoa to sustain their livelihood in the village. Unfortunately, these hard-working individuals seem to benefit the least from the fruits of their labor because their village has been plagued with corruption:

> We harvested the last bean of coffee, [. . .]. We dried, ground, and sold it unenthusiastically. To make sure we earned enough to repay all the debts.[8]

In Traites, the new social classes of the post-independence city are made up of scheming exploiters. They lend money to the peasants, but once the peasant's crop has been harvested, the good-for-nothing scoundrels cash in and come out ahead every time. Indeed, "the fruits of independence [are] ripe enough for the greedy ones to pluck" in this Ivoirian society depicted by Koné (Snyder 12-13).

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[7] My translation. La Côte d'Ivoire, pp. 68-69.
[8] My translation. See chapter 5, Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power, p. 164.

Amadou Koné's Life

Amadou Koné was born in Tangora Banfora in the south of Burkina Faso, formerly Upper Volta, in 1953. However, he spent most of his life in Côte d'Ivoire. As a child growing up in Côte d'Ivoire, he led a very simple life on his parents' farm. It was there where, often, he would anxiously wait to hear animal tales and epics with all of the family gathered together. Indeed, oral literature such as this served as the basis for Koné's writing career. Of it he related: "Les premiers textes que j'ai écrits étaient des contes traditionnels que j'avais entendu dire dans ma famille quand j'étais enfant."[9] Koné lived with his parents until he was old enough to leave for the school located in another village. He followed his older brother, who was a school teacher, from one school to the next during those early years of independence in Côte d'Ivoire. Koné received his early education at the *collège* in Grand-Bassam. He finished his secondary education in Abidjan where he attended a boarding school, a very comfortable setting and a privilege for students like him who came from a village and not a big city. He received his *baccalauréat* in June of 1971.

Koné began studying literature at the *Université d'Abidjan.* After obtaining his *licence ès Lettres Modernes*, he continued his studies in France at the *Université de Tours* where he received the *Doctorat de Troisième Cycle* in 1977. From there, he returned to Africa where he taught African and Comparative Literatures at the *Université Nationale de Côte d'Ivoire* in Abidjan until 1990. In addition to teaching, Koné also wrote his

[9] "The first texts I wrote were traditional tales that I had heard as a child in my family." My translation. Amadou Koné, "De la mission d'un théâtre africain moderne," Lumières africaines (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 1997) 116.

second major dissertation, which he defended in 1987. Koné received the *Doctorat d'État ès Lettres* in Comparative Literature from the *Université de Limoges* (France).

In 1990, Koné obtained a prestigious fellowship from the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation. For 2 years, he carried out research on West African literature at the University of Bayreuth in Germany; he also lectured on literature and held seminars on his own works. In 1992, Koné came to the United States where he accepted a position in the Department of French and Italian at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. Talking with interviewer Christian Kocani about his decision not to return to Côte d'Ivoire at the end of his fellowship term, Koné remarked:

> I regret leaving. I miss my students. I know that there, in my country, I had responsibilities and I tried to carry them out for about 15 years. When I finished my Thesis in France, I obtained a position there as Assistant Professor. So, I could have stayed there, but I preferred to go home so that I could contribute my time to building the country modestly, of course, in the area of Higher Education. Then I left after fifteen years for personal reasons. But in my mind, it was not a definitive departure and it still is not one. Furthermore, you can serve your country wherever you live. It also depends on the diverse opportunities you have to do it. As for myself, even in the United States, I continue to serve Côte d'Ivoire.[10]

After 5 years at Tulane, Koné and his family (a wife and four children) left New Orleans and moved to Washington, DC. There, he joined the Georgetown University faculty in 1997. Today, Amadou Koné continues to teach African literature and culture south of the Sahara at Georgetown.

The author of novels, plays, short stories, children's stories, essays, and literary studies, Koné is a specialist in Francophone African literature. His teaching and research interests center around the oral tradition of Africa and its modern written literature. More specifically, he has focused on African tales and epics and their influence on the modern

[10] My translation. Christian Kocani, "L'exil d'Amadou Koné," L'Agora 24 juillet 1998: 12.

African novel. Koné has published two books on the relationships between oral and modern African literature: Du récit oral au roman: Étude sur les avatars de la tradition héroïque dans le roman africain and Des textes oraux au roman moderne: Étude sur les avatars de la tradition orale dans le roman ouest-africain. Both studies, which were based on the two dissertations, were published in 1985 and 1993, respectively. Together with Gérard D. Lezou and Joseph Mlanhoro, Koné published the first anthology of literature from Côte d'Ivoire entitled Anthologie de la littérature ivoirienne (1983). This compilation of literary pieces, which highlights the originality of the nation's literature, includes excerpts from myths, plays, poetry, and novels. Koné has also edited a collection of essays on African literature and cinema in Lumières africaines: Nouveaux propos sur la littérature et le cinéma africains (1997).

An Overview of Amadou Koné's Writing Career

Amadou Koné's career as a creative writer began at an early age. In middle school, he wrote his first play, Samory de Bissandougou. This historical drama relates the tragedy of a son murdered by his own father, Samory Touré, the great Muslim emperor. Samory Touré was born in 1830 in Sanankoro, in what is now northern Guinea; he died in exile in Gabon in 1900. A member of the Malinke people, Samory was a gifted commander who led a band of warriors in establishing a powerful chiefdom in Guinea. As already mentioned, the warrior chief also opposed French ambitions to build an empire in West Africa (Yansané 133).

In Koné's play, Samory de Bissandougou, Samory has his son killed because the son admires the enemy, that is, the French. Here, the emperor's love for his son comes second to his duty to fight the French enemy. Reflecting on the time he wrote the play, Koné said:

> [. . .] my classmates who knew my passion for literature asked me to write a play for the end of the school year celebration. We had just studied Le Cid by Corneille. So I searched for a Cornelian dilemma in African history and found one [. . .]. This short play, Samory de Bissandougou, was performed with a certain amount of success and my classmates and my professors encouraged me to continue writing. That was in 1966.[11]

Although the play was never published, the experience of writing it made Koné realize that he was better suited for writing novels; he began writing plays again much later as a university student.

Koné's formal career as a novelist began with the publication of Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel in 1976; he was only 23 years old. The plot of Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel is situated in colonial Africa. In the novel, the author describes the life of Karfa, a farmer, who lost his parents as a child; and who later loses his wife at the hands of evil sorcerers. Karfa (along with his son, Lamine) decides to leave the village to escape this past life riddled with nothing but tragedy. However, tragedy seems to follow Karfa and Lamine when they stumble upon the village, Soubakagnandougou, which is inhabited by evil witch doctors; they are disguised everywhere and they certainly cause much harm to innocent villagers. But, there are also good sorcerers present in the village, like Fanhikroi. The good sorcerer explains this to Lamine:

> But your kind—you Moslems—are not familiar with sorcerers. You must be informed that there are different types. There are those who meet at night to eat human souls. These blood-thirsty vampires are devoted to decimating their own families. They amuse themselves by casting spells on those who have succeeded and whom they envy. They are sadists. Their group is the largest [. . .]. But there are also good sorcerers, who risk their lives at night, protecting the innocent and defenseless against the sadists' deeds.[12]

[11] My translation. Lumières africaines, p. 116.
[12] Translated from the French by Mary Lee Martin-Koné. The Threshold of the Unreal, pp. 55-56. An unpublished translation. Used with permission from the translator.

In Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel, Koné reveals the deadly practices of sorcerers who curse the village of Soubakagnandougou. At the same time, he also presents a traditional group of individuals who make up an integral part of the African society in which Karfa and the others live. Of course, Koné includes other traditional elements in the text that characterize an African society. For instance, one reads about farm workers, *griots* who play the *kora*,[13] marriages, various celebrations, and funerals. These elements are a welcome addition to an otherwise heartbreaking story dominated by tragedy and anguish.

Koné wrote Les Frasques d'Ébinto before Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel while he was still a student in Grand-Bassam. He finished the novel in high school in Abidjan and it was later published in 1979. Les Frasques d'Ébinto is well known by middle and high school students throughout Côte d'Ivoire and is considered one of the most beautiful novels written by Koné (Abissiri). The story is about Ébinto, a young student, around the same age as the author, who learns about the "facts of life" the hard way when he must interrupt his studies and marry Monique, a childhood friend, who becomes pregnant. The narrator-protagonist's dreams are ultimately shattered once he is faced with this new life, a life without the education for which he so hungered. The novel is also about love; but in the end, love is not enough to save Monique, who dies from a horrible tragedy. With regard to Ébinto and Monique, one critic suggests the following:

> There is a profond contradiction between the harshness of Ébinto turned towards the future and the sensitivity of Ébinto tied to the past. This contradiction is none other than the severe, perhaps mutilating, conflict of tomorrow throughout

[13] In his book, Epic Traditions of Africa (1999), Stephen Belcher discusses the term *griot*. He writes that, "From the French, the word has come into English. The term applies to the musicians and singers of many ethnic groups in French West Africa; their functions resemble the combined roles of minstrel and herald in medieval Europe. Music and song are widely seen as their essential activities, but *griots* also fulfill other purposes. They are widely credited with diplomatic skills (the art of the word) and may serve as intermediaries in negotiations; in the past they were the spokesmen for royalty, protecting the majesty of the ruler by isolating him" (8). Belcher also defines the *kora* as a "large stringed instrument (a harp-lute) used by many *griots* in West Africa" (216).

> humanity: the risk of failure, that is death, remains absolute. The Ébinto-Monique couple is symbolic beyond the anecdote: willpower=life.[14]

Essentially, Koné's narrative traces, in the first-person, a young man's awareness of those setbacks that can completely alter an individual's life. For Graziano Benelli, "Cette œuvre est bien accueillie par la critique car elle présente une certaine originalité d'écriture, tout en soulignant les difficultés quotidiennes auxquelles se heurte la jeunesse de ce pays."[15]

Published in 1980, Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros depicts the experiences and survival of Africa's peasantry in a post-independence society. In the novel, old Mamadou and his family are subjected to hard times in the village of Kongodjan. The poor peasant family is faced with setbacks, especially with the *blakoros* in power, and they have to endure suffering and hardship in the hope that a better day will come tomorrow. In the preface to the novel, Jésus Kouassi Yoboué explains the meaning of the term "*blakoro*:"

> In Bambara society, the *blakoro* is a young boy not yet circumcised. He is therefore the young man who has not yet been initiated into real life. He does not have the right to speak out: he is not yet a man.[16]

In Traites, Koné presents a family that must make sacrifices, which Mamadou does for his children, and which Lassinan, the protagonist, ultimately does for the whole family.

The novel deals with a corrupt society where problems, which are just as disturbing as the ones that existed in colonial Africa, are made evident through the

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[14] My translation. Robert Pageard addressed these words to Amadou Koné in a letter. The quote was taken from the back cover of the 1980 edition of Les Frasques d'Ébinto.

[15] "This work has been well received by critics because it presents a kind of original writing, while at the same time stressing the everyday problems which the youth of this country must confront." My translation. Graziano Benelli, "Le Roman en Côte d'Ivoire," Regards sur la littérature de Côte d'Ivoire (Anna Paolo Mossetto. Rome: Bulzoni, 1999) 184-185.

[16] My translation. See chapter 3, Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power, p. 64.

presentation of characters embodying traditional African values, on the one hand, and on the other, persons who have adopted values established by Western societies. Within Koné's fiction, the *blakoros* men do not embody African values and neither do certain women in the society. They all function rather on the basis of new and poorly mastered values. Naturally, they impose their own rules out of sheer greed, and as a result, it becomes more and more difficult for the peasants to make an honest living. Indeed, Yoboué sums it up best in the preface by stating that the book is "L'autopsie d'une société dégénérée dans laquelle la corruption a été érigée en institution."[17] Essentially, in Traites, the reader witnesses a battle between the *blakoros*, eager for money and power, and the poor peasants who want to build the future on traditional values, like honesty, hospitality, hard work, self-respect, and respect for others.

In 1982, the second volume of Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros was published and entitled Courses. Here the reader discovers that old Mamadou has died and that Lassinan has continued the struggle in the village of Kongodjan against the *blakoroya*, that is, those anti-values perpetuated by the *blakoros* who insist on exploiting the poor peasants. The reader also learns that Abou, Lassisnan's youngest brother, has just returned home after completing his education in France. "J'y suis allé," Abou explains, "j'ai essayé de trouver des réponses aux questions européennes qui intéressent aussi l'Afrique et qui m'intriguaient. J'ai essayé de comprendre de près les nouveaux mythes qui s'abattent sur nous et nous gouvernent."[18] Now, Abou's mission after coming back from Europe is to

[17] "The autopsy of a degenerate society in which corruption has been institutionalized." My translation. See chapter 3, Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power, p. 63.
[18] "I went there. I tried to find answers to the European questions that also concern Africa and that intrigued me. I tried to understand up close the new myths that beat down on us and control us." My translation. Courses, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros, p. 123.

teach the others about the modern myths that are controlling them. He has every intention of securing a teaching job at the school in the village, but surprisingly, does not get the position for which he applied. Abou, instead, decides to accept a temporary position at the Department for the Arts, where he feels he still might be able to do some good for his people.

Koné's latest novel, Les Coupeurs de têtes, was published years after the completion of Courses, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros. In Les Coupeurs de têtes (1997), Koné describes an African society that has been afflicted with many evils. For Lilyan Kesteloot, an expert in the field of Francophone African literature, the novel is one of "chaos" that portrays an apocalyptic atmosphere (270). Indeed it is an apocalyptic scene where political corruption, crime, embezzlement, prostitution, illiteracy, and poverty have all been established as a way of life. After having spent 15 years in Europe, Kassi, the narrator, comes home only to find the city in this state of turmoil. Kassi's destiny lies in the social setting presented in Les Coupeurs de têtes.

Les Coupeurs de têtes has been hailed "une œuvre plus dense et mûre."[19] The entire book is based on a metaphor; there are really no "*coupeurs de têtes*." It is a metaphor used by the author in order to depict an Africa where certain people do not want others to think. Instead, they want to remove their "*tête*," that is, their capacity to think and reflect upon the problems in an attempt to come up with solutions for themselves. Koné enjoyed critical acclaim to match the success of Les Coupeurs de têtes when in 1999, he was awarded the *Grand Prix Littéraire de Côte d'Ivoire* by the *Association des Écrivains de Côte d'Ivoire*. The *Fraternité-Matin* newspaper reported

[19] "a more mature and solid work." My translation. Regards sur la littérature de Côte d'Ivoire, p. 187.

that novels, which are bestowed the *Prix Ivoire*, like Les Coupeurs de têtes, are sure to "ajouter à la dynamique du livre dans [le] pays et aider à confirmer la grandeur de la littérature ivoirienne."[20]

Although fiction-writing is the focal point of this introduction, it is also important to mention a genre for which the author has become well known. Koné is also a talented dramatist. He has written four plays: Samory de Bissandougou,[21] Le Respect des morts, De la chaire au trône, and Les Canaris sont vides. Le Respect des morts and De la chaire au trône were both published in 1980, the same year as Traites. In both plays, the author presents characters who illustrate the conflict between tradition and modernity in Africa. Le Respect des morts depicts the construction of a dam, which will supposedly help with the region's underdevelopment. The villagers, however, are against its construction, for it represents the destruction of their way of life, as well as the land inhabited by their ancestors for generations. It is up to the chief's son, who was educated in Europe, to convince the villagers of the good that will come from the dam's construction. In De la chaire au trône, Koné tells the story of a university professor who is made a prince, but because of tradition, must be ritually put to death after twelve years of absolute power. But when that fateful day arrives, the professor-prince refuses to give into tradition, thereby refusing death.

De la chaire au trône and Le Respect des morts have been made accessible to audiences outside of Africa. A German translation of Le Respect des morts [Der Staudamm] was published in 1991 and an Italian translation of De la chaire au trône [La

[20] "add to the dynamics of the book in [the] country and help to confirm the greatness of Côte d'Ivoire literature. "Amadou Koné, Grand Lauréat," Fraternité-Matin 20 avril 1999: 1.
[21] In middle school, Koné wrote his first play, Samory de Bissandougou, which I discussed at the beginning of this section.

vita provisoria] was published in 1996.[22] Koné's third play, Les Canaris sont vides, was published in 1984. In this play, peasants must deal with a severe drought that has struck their village in the Sahel region. Consequently, they must also deal with famine. These three plays by Koné have been successful, earning the author awards. De la chaire au trône and Le Respect des morts won prizes at the *Concours Théâtral Inter-Africain* in 1972 and 1974, respectively. Les Canaris sont vides won the grand prize at the *Concours Théâtral Inter-Africain* in 1976.

There are also children's books to add to Koné's list of publications. In collaboration with his wife, he wrote La Force de vouloir (1978). The story is about the strong relationship between a father and son. When times get hard for Ousmane, his young son, Birama, is there to support him and give him the confidence to fulfill his talent despite blindness. Terre ivoirienne (1979) relates the adventures of the protagonist, Tikilikan, in Côte d'Ivoire. Indeed, he discovers this land, its diverse regions and inhabitants. At the same time, he also learns the history and culture of his country. As Koné expressed in an interview with János Riesz:

> Literature for children is something I consider an area of vital importance for African culture. Traditional story-telling, once a basic factor in the education on the African child, no longer exists. It has been replaced by television, the programming of which comes from abroad, and by children's books, also from abroad. It would seem to me to be of prime importance to develop children's literature in Africa, to provide a literature that talks about African culture and about the concerns of young Africans, a literature that would be a valid replacement for traditional story-telling. Books conceived of and written locally will be more likely to create the kind of interest that will induce children to become habitual readers.[23]

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[22] Janos Riesz, Der Staudamm, (Köln, 1991). Paolo Maddoni, La vita provisoria (Roma: Grin srl, 1996).
[23] Translated from the French by János Riesz. "Amadou Koné at the University of Bayreuth," Afrika 10-11-12 (1986): 36.

Kaméléfata ou les ennemis de la traite was actually Koné's first novel written while he was still in middle school. The novel tells the story of young Africans who struggle against the slave trade. Although much later in the author's career, Kaméléfata was eventually published in 1987 as a children's book. Koné has also published a collection of short stories that focus on the destruction of traditional African values in the book, Les Liens (1980).

Thematic Content(s) in Koné's Traites and Kourouma's Les Soleils des Indépendances and their Respective Structures

According to the Ghanaian poet, novelist, and scholar, Kofi Awoonor:

> Independence brought an era of euphoria and great hopes to Africa. The dreams of agitators and nationalists were realized when one by one new flags were hoisted in place of colonial flags, and new tunes replaced imperial anthems [. . .]. In many countries there were massive jubilations, and many libations were poured and drunk. There was a vague sense of relief among the African people, who were only dimly aware of the nature of the changes in their fortune; everywhere there was talk of Africa's new man: bright-eyed, armed with the righteousness of his cause, ready to take his place in the sun, self-assured, and no longer abused. Aggressively proud, he was to become, once and for all, the master of his own house. (43-44)

However, this "euphoric" celebration of the arrival of independence in Africa failed to endure. One soon discovered that after the exploitation of the people by the colonial masters, the Africans who replaced the Europeans often ended up exploiting their fellow Africans. Certainly, some writers came to look upon the new ruling African bourgeoisie as being no better than the oppressive colonizer. Even with regards to Africa's economy during independence, one critic pointed out that "d'une économie caractérisée par l'autosubsistance et fondée sur le troc, on est passé brutalement à une économie de type

capitaliste fondée sur le profit."[24] Writers, like Ousmane Sembène, Camara Laye, Ahmadou Kourouma, and Amadou Koné are aware of the misappropriation of the gains of independence by rich, unconscionable employers and the corrupt ruling class in Africa. Consequently in their novels, which were published after 1960, they choose to examine such problems as excessive bureaucracy, bribary, corruption, neo-colonialism, and forms of social aberration.

Amadou Koné uses his fiction to denounce the ills of the post-independence society and try to bring about its reformation. The author discloses, particularly in Traites, the harsh existence of Côte d'Ivoire's oppressed peasantry. He makes interrogations and describes events and situations in the novel that relate to the closest daily reality of the peasant class. Koné is a defender of the exploited masses who have been betrayed by their fellow citizens in post-independence Africa.

Koné's Traites may indeed bear some resemblance to Ahmadou Kourouma's Les Soleils des Indépendances; this seems to suggest Kourouma's strong influence on Koné. Ahmadou Kourouma, born in 1927, has now become one of the best-known Francophone writers from Côte d'Ivoire, in fact, from all Sub-Saharan Africa. In Les Soleils des Indépendances (1968), the author presents the social and political realities of the years immediately following independence. He tells the story of a hereditary Malinke prince of Horodougou whose entire world changes with the coming of independence. In modern Africa, Fama, the protagonist and disinherited Doumbouya prince, is unskilled and illiterate in the European language; he is practically a beggar. In fact, Fama is a victim of

[24] "from an economy characterized by self-sufficiency and built on barter, we suddenly switched to a capitalist type economy based on profit." My translation. Bruno Gnaoulé-Oupoh, La littérature ivoirienne (Paris-Abidjan: Karthala-CEDA, 2000) 311.

independence. He represents the group of deluded Africans lured from the village by promises of opportunity in the capital city. Misfortune, however, is the only outcome. Like Ahmadou Kourouma, Koné also denounces the new bourgeoisie who have adopted European ideologies.

In addition, certain individuals in Traites and Les Soleils des Indépendances are linked to one another because they share similar viewpoints concerning Africa's independence. Fama (Les Soleils des Indépendances) can be linked with old Mamadou (Traites), and the narrator (Les Soleils des Indépendances) can be linked with Lassinan (Traites). Fama and old Mamadou have not adjusted to the changes that have occurred in Africa since independence. That is because they only know their own culture, customs, and values. It is difficult for them to see beyond tradition, especially in the independent society where modernism prevails. Furthermore, neither Fama nor old Mamadou understand the European language, that is, French. All these factors contribute to their perception of the independent society. For Fama and old Mamadou, it is certainly one where traditional values have no place. This makes it all the more difficult for them to function, because they are blind to certain issues. Yet, the narrator of Les Soleils des Indépendances understands how this new society functions. The same can be said for Lassinan who grasps fully the situation confronting the peasant community depicted in Traites. Both are aware of the new rules of the game, or rather, the new exploitation in independent Africa. Kourouma's and Koné's novels are directed against the new native rulers of post-independence. At the same time, the novels also highlight cultural problems encountered by Africans because of contact between African and Western civilizations.

In my opinion, Amadou Koné's narrative technique in Traites is somewhat reminiscent of Ahmadou Kourouma's Les Soleils des Indépendances. First, one notices the question-response technique used by Kourouma and Koné in their respective narrations. Thanks to this technique, the writer is able to introduce a new element or theme into the story, as is the case in the following example taken from The Suns of Independence:

> Balla wanted to go with them. A blind man – what could he see? Nothing. An old man with swollen aching legs – when would they arrive there with him along? Perhaps at sunset. A Kaffir whose forehead never touched the ground – what would he do there? Nothing and nothing. They thought he was joking. But no! Balla insisted. He evoked the duty to pay a last visit to the deceased. (78-79)

Kourouma makes known to the reader the unfortunate condition facing Balla. The blind African is surely one determined individual, but in the end, he must remain in the village. The author also provides additional details about Balla by using the question-response technique. He writes: "How did Balla become the greatest hunter of all Horodugu?" (84). The question is then followed by a lengthy answer that highlights the different events, which led to Balla becoming a great hunter. Koné uses the same kind of technique in Traites to explain, for instance, the reason behind Akafu's "exceptionally imposing potbelly." And as for Bakary, the reader discovers how this master tailor began to lose his fortune:

> So, what did Bakary do with his money? It would have been impolite to ask him. In any case, they knew one thing. The great tailor was almost suffocated by his numerous friends, his relatives who came out from the woodwork. Each one wished him well. And to prove it to him, they would offer him their daughter to marry [. . .]. But each one knows that the women who are offered in this manner cost quite a lot.

> But *naforo*—money—is nothing. And Bakary never knew when his fortune began to escape him.[25]

Essentially, the question-response technique allows both authors to reveal more information in the narratives about the characters in general, their achievements, as well as their setbacks.

Another important feature of Kourouma's and Koné's narrative technique is the use of *analepse*[26] or the flashback. Kourouma certainly uses an incessant number of *analepses* in Les Soleils des Indépendances. For example, he begins with an *analepse* in part one of his novel, which informs the reader about how the French deprived Fama of his inheritance as chief of all Horodougou. Another *analepse* makes the reader relive the terrible experience of Salimata's excision and, then, her rape by the fetish-priest. Here, the *analepse* takes the form of a remembered memory of the past. Indeed, this horrible memory will influence the poor, young woman's entire conjugal, social, and psychological being. In Traites, the reader learns about Adebayo's days as a successful shopkeeper who could give credit to the peasants. The reader also gains an insight into Bakary's life as a master tailor. In chapter one, part two of Traites, Koné discusses Tièfi's life in the capital city of Blakorodougou:

> Tièfi had left the village at quite a young age. He had headed directly for the capital Blakorodougou without even understanding a word of French. It's true that at that time, Dyula was spoken just about anywhere and you did not necessarily need to understand French in order to move around in the country. Therefore, Tièfi had left for the capital. The man's adventure began there. This adventure immediately became a legend that Tièfi would recount by adding on each time some new changes.[27]

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[25] My translation. See chapter 4, Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power, pp. 97-98.
[26] This is the technical term used by Gérard Genette in Figures III, pp. 90-105.
[27] My translation. See chapter 5, Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power, pp. 118-119.

Kourouma and Koné shift the readers' attention to the past experiences of their characters. In doing so, readers are given information, which they would otherwise not have. Therefore, by using the narrative technique known as *analepse*, the authors are able to provide a clear picture of the background and social circumstances surrounding the lives of their characters.

Description is another significant element used by Koné and Kourouma. The authors provide vivid images of events, places, and characters in their texts. These descriptions not only support and contribute to the narration, but they also play an integral role in the unfolding of events in the story. Kourouma describes, for example, Fama's weak condition in prison in these terms:

> Fama was not made to perform hard labour, but his health was deteriorating. Guinea-worm swelled in his armpits and knees. He was drying up; his eyes sank into sockets deeper than graves, his fleshless ears stood out like those of a hare on the alert, his lips grew thin and taut, his hair scanty. (The Suns of Independence 117)

Here, Kourouma presents a rather graphic but clear image of Fama's state of health caused by twenty years of hard labour. Koné gives an equally clear picture of Issa's lingering state of health in Traites:

> The child, lying on a bambou mat, wrapped in a thick wool blanket, was sweating and shivering with cold. His yellowed eyes vaguely stared at his big brother. Soulé's hand rested on the child's forehead. His body was very hot and damp with sweat. However, Issa was cold.[28]

These descriptions provide detail for the reader. At the same time, in these two particular cases, they also cause the reader to feel an overwhelming sense of despair for Fama and Issa. The mental images obtained from these descriptions allow the reader, indeed, to grasp the reality and severity of the situations confronting these characters.

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[28] My translation. See chapter 5, Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power, p. 158.

Space in the novel, as it relates to location, is similarly described by Koné and Kourouma. Essentially, there are two distinct locations to consider: the village and the city. Traites alternates from village to city; the narrative begins and ends in the village, unlike the narrative in Les Soleils des Indépendances, which begins in the city and ends in the village. The peasants, who are depicted in Koné's Traites, dwell in the village of Kongodjan. The poor village is considered a peaceful place, far from the tumultuous life that exists in the city of Fagodougou, among others. For old Mamadou, it is a familiar territory where he feels most comfortable, and where some individuals still show him respect. As for Fama, he is still the respected prince of Horodougou, the last legitimate Doumbouya, in the poor village of Togobala. He is neither insulted nor looked down upon and called a beggar, which is the case in the fast-paced city whose name has not been specified. This particular city, depicted in Les Soleils des Indépendances by Kourouma, has an African quarter, which is poor and very dirty, and a European quarter, which is clean and luxurious. In Traites, the "nouveau riche" Africans have moved into an area of Fagodougou, which was formerly the European quarter of the city:

> There only, two-storied homes stood. This quarter had remained the "Business District," the most active Center of the city. The big market and its enormous rusty roof, the only cinema, and the only dance hall were located there. And on the ground floor of the two-storied homes, Syrian and Lebanese shopkeepers had replaced the European colony.[29]

The description of space in the novels is precise. The reader learns that the city is, overall, a place of desolation and scheming for the Africans in Les Soleils des Indépendances; corruption is the order of the day in the city portrayed in Traites. In spite of oppression, the villages presented in both texts offer a haven of tranquility absent from

[29] My translation. See chapter 4, Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power, p. 93.

the city.[30] Koné's Traites and Kourouma's Les Soleils des Indépendances do, in fact, share similar structures which, in many cases, give additional feedback to the reader about the characters, their surroundings, and the events, both present and past, that affect and that have affected them.

A look at the roles of some specific characters, particularly in Traites, is significant, for their roles foster the development of events throughout the story-line. Koné often makes use of certain individuals in his text to expose corruption, repression, and hypocrisy in post-independence Ivoirian society. In Traites, one can recognize the importance of those characters who play either active or passive roles in the struggle against all the evils—illiteracy, misery, injustice, and exploitation. Lassinan is an active participant; he essentially takes positive steps to make a change in the environment of which the peasant community has become a victim. On the other hand, old Mamadou and Tièfi have passive roles in that they can only hope for a change to occur in society.

Lassinan's role in Traites is paramount. Not only is Lassinan an active participant, but he is also the hero in the narrative. It is through his role as the hero, more specifically the non-traditional hero, that he is able to demonstrate commitment to the cause. One can make a distinction between Lassinan's role as the non-traditional hero and the role of the traditional hero often found in African literature. Unlike the traditional African hero[31] who works collectively with the group to achieve a common

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[30] Pius Ngandu refers to villages as "*les espaces naturels*" and also as a "*refuge*" in his book, Kourouma et le mythe, p. 75.

[31] Soundjata is an example of the traditional African hero. The great African epic of Soundjata celebrates the career of Soundjata Keita, the thirteenth-century King of Mali, the largest and most famous of African empires in the Middle Ages. Soundjata Keita's reign lasted for twenty years during which time he served as the military leader who defeated King Soumaoro Kante of Sosso at Krina and, in turn, established the capital at Niani. Soundjata had numerous followers when he went to battle with Soumaoro Kante, including his mother, Sogolon, his sister, Nana Triban, his brother, Manding Bory, and his *griot*, Balla Fasseke. They all united and formed a solid group that supported and helped Soundjata, the great hero and

goal in society, the non-traditional hero takes on the challenge alone. The difference lies primarily in the representation of the protagonist with respect to the individual struggle and the group struggle.

In Traites, Koné portrays Lassinan as a studious and hard-working young man with a mission to uncover the evils of the post-colonial society in which the peasant community lives. Lassinan understands the exploiters' game and desperately wants to put an end to it. His goal is to open up the villagers' eyes to the scheme; he must get them to see Habib, Doulaye, and Akafu, to name a few, for whom they really are, that is low down, heartless crooks. In order to do so, Lassinan must try to convince the peasants that their village has been plagued with corruption. This will prove, however, to be a very difficult task for the hero who, for the most part, struggles alone against the ruling elite that is controlling the community. Through many conversations and debates, he tries to convince the poor peasants on his own that a change is needed and that justice must be reestablished in order to put an end to the exploitation.

In one instance, Lassinan wants to convince his father and the entire village that their poverty is not Allah's will. But one learns that explaining this to devout Muslims is no easy task. They are blind to the crookedness that has made its way into their society; moreover, they assume this is the way Allah wanted it to be. In a letter to the headmistress, Lassinan writes:

> [. . .]. They think that it's Allah's will, if they wade in misery and if others live an opulent life. If it were true that God guaranteed poverty for some and abundance for others, I refuse to believe that this is God, except the god of the most powerful. I have tried to explain all that to my village, I have explained the

warrior, save Mali from the evil clutches of the sorcerer King, Soumaoro. D.T. Niane, Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1960).

> deception of the powerful and the mistakes of the poor. But people don't understand that, to a certain extent, God leaves us free to assume our destiny.[32]

Not only does Lassinan have to make the peasants understand that they are being exploited by their own people, but he must also teach them not to accept their condition, which they believe has been dealt to them by Allah. They have to learn to take control of their own lives and know that, to a certain degree, they do hold the key to their own destiny.

It is important for the peasants to know their rights and to pull together in order to overcome the exploiters' game. More than ever, they need to unite against the rich and form the co-op, which Lassinan has envisioned. The hero pushes the idea, for he knows how much a village co-op would benefit the peasant community. Interestingly, Lassinan is trying to create a sense of solidarity amongst the peasants by organizing a co-op. He wants them to join together in the struggle and help him eliminate the new social classes that have taken over and corrupted their society. But this will prove to be a very difficult task for the peasants to accomplish by themselves.

Shia is also an active participant; she supports Lassinan's cause unequivocally. Shia is aware of the bribery and corruption that have become a way of life in the village. As headmistress, she targets problems which she knows she can control. Indeed, gift giving takes on a whole new meaning when it comes time for school enrollment in the village. Shia's role is also very important because she challenges the traditional image, as seen in the eyes of men, of the submissive woman. One now observes a female standing up for herself and challenging the male in certain situations. She is not afraid to question and attack the character and tactics of cruel male exploiters described in Traites.

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[32] My translation. See chapter 5, Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power, p. 132.

Shia is not the passive observer who only hopes for a change in society. She is a determined and outspoken woman who finds herself in the position to help the peasant community, especially Lassinan's family. She does not sit back and watch exploiters as they con so many villagers out of their hard-earned money. Instead, Shia plays an active role in the fight against the injustices that prevail all around and, thus, joins the ranks of Lassinan as a kind of champion of the oppressed masses.

Literature from Koné's Generation

Just as Amadou Koné can be linked with Ahmadou Kourouma, a writer from the older generation, so too can he be linked with the younger generation of writers from Côte d'Ivoire. One recognizes this new link with the younger generation by focusing on the thematic content in their novels. Similarities to and/or differences between Koné's writing techniques and those of such authors will not be my focal point here, although I will be led to make some comments. Koné discusses various themes in his fiction, such as sorcery, education, rural African life, cultural problems as a result of the contact between Africa and the West, and the new obstacles to surmount in a post-independence society. Several authors belonging to Koné's generation[33] have also dealt with most of these themes in their fiction. In particular, I have Fatou Bolli, Tidiane Dem, Régina Yaou, and Denis Oussou-Essui in mind.

Fatou Bolli, for example, depicts sorcery in his first novel, Djigbô, which was published in 1977. The plot of Bolli's novel is situated in post-colonial Africa. The characters in Djigbô, like the ones in Traites and Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel, are Muslim, but they are also Catholic. In the novel, a host of sorcerers torment the Krou people, in

[33] These authors have published works on or around the same time as Koné.

particular, Kopè Yacinthe, the protagonist, and his family, who live in Abidjan. These men and women, who have chosen to be evil witch doctors, threaten the everyday lives of an innocent tribe. Kopè's daughter explains it to her cousin, Saly, who is skeptical about the entire phenomenon:

> For the most part, they are sorcerers from the time of birth. A great number of children are sorcerers without even knowing it; they only realize it once they are grown. The question is whether they choose or choose not to be good rather than bad and vice versa.[34]

Kopè Yacinthe discovers later on that his eldest brother and sister-in-law are sorcerers and are the ones guilty of attacking his own children. Their true identities are revealed at a ritual gathering led by Mansoua, a good witch doctor. With the help of his tam-tam[35] and some magic, Mansoua is able to expose the destructive duo who have taken, "dès leur naissance, les principes vitaux des nouveau-nés" (82).[36] Koné describes a similar gathering, where the real sorcerers are revealed, in Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel (1976). Here, the great *marabout*, Bouô Ouattara, uses his powers to disclose before all the villagers of Soubakagnandougou the queen sorcerer who has killed Karfa's son and the chief's daughter.

Fatou Bolli's novel, Djigbô, includes 8 chapters and an epilogue. The author employs the first-person narrative technique in this short novel. His style of writing is controlled and not at all elaborate, which allows for a smooth reading of the text. The descriptions are very poignant and, at times, quite graphic, which might disturb the reader. Stories are also related within the main story-line by different characters; this

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[34] My translation. Fatou Bolli, Djigbô (Abidjan: CEDA, 1977) 10.
[35] African drum made from wood and used for transmitting messages. The musical instrument also accompanies dances. "Tam-Tam." Le Petit Larousse. 1994 ed.
[36] "from birth, the vital organs of newborns." My translation.

structure alludes to the element of African traditional folklore. Altogether, Djigbô is an interesting novel that highlights the theme of sorcery in a post-independence society.

Sorcery is once again the main theme in Tidiane Dem's novel, Masseni, also published in 1977. The story takes place in colonial Africa, in a village called Ganda in Côte d'Ivoire. The reader learns that Dady Konaté and his wife, Minignan, have been unable to conceive a child after five years of marriage because of a spell cast on Minignan by her neighbor, Nakaridia. Although skeptical, Dady and Minignan decide to seek help from Karamoko, a well-known *marabout*. But after many meetings and animal sacrifices, the couple fail to see any results. In fact, Karamoko turns out to be a fake *marabout* and has disappeared with a large sum of Dady's money. Finally, with the help of a hunter and an old woman who, in particular, holds the key ingredient for a remedy, Minignan's sterility is cured. She and Dady soon have a baby girl and call her Masseni.

The remaining pages of Dem's novel focus on Masseni's life. She grows up to be a beautiful and intelligent woman and many men desire her. The area chief turns out to be the lucky man who wins Masseni's hand in marriage; she will now live in a harem with his other wives. The first wife who, in the beginning, is a kind of mother figure for Masseni, ultimately becomes her rival out of jealousy and attempts to do her harm with the help of her fellow sorcerers. Every attempt fails, and the occult ways of the first wife are discovered. After some time passes, we learn that the chief suddenly dies after being struck down with paralysis. Masseni is overcome with grief as a result of her husband's death, but she must go on for the sake of their daughter. In the end, Masseni accidentally falls and, tragically, she dies as her friend, Mabrontié, remains close by her side.

Marabouts play interesting roles in Dem's and Koné's respective texts. They can be defined as Muslim holy men, healers, and teachers believed to have supernatural powers (Robinson 25). In the novel Masseni, Dem seems to have taken the opportunity to attack the character of these individuals. On the one hand, the reader learns that *marabouts* can help bring peace and resolution to a situation that has threatened a family; on the other hand, they learn that *marabouts* can resort to trickery and steal money from innocent people by making them believe that they only have their best interest at heart. In the beginning, Dady Konaté does have his suspicions, for he is well aware of how "good" *marabouts* should act:

> The good *marabouts*, those who are worthy of the name, do not ask to be paid before carrying out a job. They only accept a reward if the work they have carried out is a success, and if tangible and positive results come from it. Furthermore, they do not set a price, for one cannot put a pricetag on God's name. If the client is satisfied, he gives what he can, and the real *marabout* does not complain.[37]

Nevertheless, Dady takes this risk for his wife's sake and trusts that the *marabout*, Karamoko, will find a cure for her sterility. In doing so, he agrees with all of the *marabout*'s requests but, in the end, winds up being duped.

The *marabout* presented by Koné in Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel (1976) is the total opposite of the one portrayed by Tidiane Dem in Masseni. He distinguishes himself from the good-for-nothing-scoundrel as well as the evil sorcerer:

> I am not one of those wicked Moslems, one of those charlatans who, instead of spreading the good of their religion pass their time deceiving others. I hate these deceitful marabouts as much as I do witches. They are cast from the same mold. They are all crooks and sometimes even assassins.[38]

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[37] My translation. Tidiane Dem, Masseni (Abidjan: NEA, 1977) 77.
[38] Translated from the French by Mary Lee Martin-Koné. The Threshold of the Unreal, pp. 125-126. An unpublished translation.

In the interview with Koné following this introduction, he comments on the behavior of *marabouts*, particularly the one who turns out to be a fake in his novel Traites.[39] He acknowledges the scheming actions of these individuals who exist in the society where he grew up. *Marabout* behavior is, therefore, a particular target of Koné's criticism as evidenced in Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros.

Masseni is an easy novel to follow. It consists of a forward, an introduction, and 7 lengthy chapters, which recount a multitude of different events. The author includes elements of oral tradition in the narrative, such as proverbs and songs. One of many songs is revealed to the reader in the first chapter on page 14; this particular hymn is sung by a choir of young girls to celebrate the new moon and the end of *Ramadan*. There are 2 stories with distinct plots in Masseni. The first 3 chapters of the novel pertain to the first story; they focus on Dady's and Minignan's desire for a baby, and finally the birth of that baby, named Masseni. Then, the last 4 chapters, or the second story, revolve around the life and death of Masseni. With regards to the novel's structure, one can say that the author proposes an interesting way of not only organizing the narrative, but also documenting the daily adventures in a village during colonialism. Koné, however, sees otherwise and candidly states: "Masseni est incontestablement mal construit."[40] I do not agree with Koné's point of view regarding the structure of the novel. In my opinion, I feel that the novel's unique composition contributes to the readers' overall comprehension of this beautiful, yet tragic story.

Régina Yaou is another Côte d'Ivoire writer from Koné's generation. Her first

[39] See interview question with Koné, Chapter 2, p. 58—"What is the function of Islam in the novel?"
[40] "Beyond any shadow of a doubt, Masseni is poorly constructed." My translation. Amadou Koné, "Roman africain et littérature orale," Komparatistische Hefte 15-16 (1987): 30.

novel, Lezou Marie ou les écueils de la vie, was published in 1982. In the novel, Yaou depicts the trials and tribulations of the main character, Marie, whose life changes forever once she leaves the village A… to continue her education in Abidjan. Not only does her mother die back in the village, but Marie also discovers that her death was at the hands of sorcerers who turn out to be family members. Again, we find sorcery as a recurrent theme in Côte d'Ivoire literature. But, as Koné explained:

> Sorcery is a part of certain African societies. It influences the everyday behaviour of individuals that live in them. There is a need to talk about these practices and demystify them. Writing on a matter of this kind is a means of inviting each reader to reflect on it and, possibly, to propose solutions. (Riesz 36)

After the mother's tragic death, Marie's life takes another turn for the worse. Not only does Marie's father stop funding her schooling, but her fiancé, Jacques, also betrays and leaves Marie with child. The baby is born, but unfortunately, he dies a while later because Marie does not have the money needed so that he can receive the proper healthcare. As a result, she loses her faith and resorts to all kinds of vices, among them, prostitution, when she moves to the city for a job. Marie hides her double life from Pierre, a journalist whom she loves very much. But when her secret is revealed, and right before Pierre's eyes, she cannot live with herself anymore and commits suicide.

The plot of Lezou Marie ou les écueils de la vie is situated in independent Africa, and it unfolds mainly in the capital city. Régina Yaou primarily undertakes issues that affect women in modern African society. Education and money, or the lack there of, is a constant issue, as well as the events that lead her to turn to prostitution. On the whole, Yaou deals with social problems, especially from a woman's standpoint, in a post-independence society.

There is nothing complex about the structure of Lezou Marie ou les écueils de la vie. The novel itself consists of 11 chapters. What does strike the reader is the way the narrative unfolds in these chapters. The narration is rather abrupt and, consequently, the story does not read very well. Be that as it may, RéginaYaou has told a profound story. The characters, as well as the events depicted in the novel are all plausible. And though the author's language tends to be flat, she does inject intense feeling into the narrative, especially when describing those moments of crisis in Marie's life.

Like Régina Yaou's novel, Les Saisons sèches by Denis Oussou-Essui also takes place in Côte d'Ivoire. The post-independence city with its corruption and new social classes forms the backdrop for this novel published in 1979. Kimou Aguié, the so-called "hero," has just returned to his country after a fifteen-year stay in France where he received his engineering degree. He hopes to secure a job for which he is qualified in the city, but is sadly disappointed when he is hired only temporarily at the *Centre National de Renseignements*. Kimou realizes that the world is changing, but for his uncle Ahébé, it is much worse than that:

> Say rather that our world is headed for catastrophy. Watch out, my nephew. Be careful in the city. Our independence is not the same as the Whiteman's independence. The Whiteman's scandal is obvious. Anyone can see into it. But we Africans, I tell you, we are black-hearted. We are always ready to step on the next man to get by.[41]

In the end, Kimou does manage to write a letter to "*Monsieur le Président*" asking him to take action against corruption in the country before it is too late. Writing this letter, however, will be the extent of his accomplishment in the text. In fact, one should

[41] My Translation. Denis Oussou-Essui, Les Saisons sèches (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1979) 55.

not even consider Kimou as the main character or "hero" because he really does not accomplish anything.

The author makes use of *analepse* at the beginning of Les Saisons sèches, which reveals to the reader the events surrounding the death of Kimou's parents under colonialism. In addition, he uses African traditional elements such as proverbs (p. 55) and songs (p. 10), which highlight the oral quality of the narrative.[42] Les Saisons sèches depicts a series of situations in 30 chapters. I am referring to situations because the novel does not have a "plot," that is, in the traditional sense of the term. The author paints a picture of the current social and political situation in independent Africa. Consequently, the reader discovers that Africans have learned the ins and outs of the great political game of the country, and as a result, corruption is the order of the day.

Koné's Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros, is a powerful, heartfelt story that can easily be read at one sitting. It begins with a brief message from the author, which helps the reader to comprehend more clearly his intentions regarding the language used in the text. Following Koné's message is a preface written by Jésus Kouassi Yoboué. In the preface, Yoboué briefly comments on the unfortunate turn of events about to unfold in the story and he also pays homage to Koné. Following Yoboué's remarks is a short prelude to the novel. It sets up the narrative and provides a backdrop of daily life in the peasants' village.

The 96 page novel is then divided into 2 parts that are broken down into chapters. There are 4 chapters in part 1, which is titled, *Difficile Chemin vers la Quête du Savoir*

[42] Elements of oral literature, particularly concerning Koné's text, will be further discussed in the next section.

[A Difficult Path toward the Quest for Knowledge]. Part 2 consists of 5 chapters and is titled, *Le Peuple qu'on trait* [The People they milk]. The chapters are narratively linked and vary in length. The narrative structure takes the form of a series of episodes that occur in either the village or the city, and are linked by key figures like Lassinan and Mamadou.

As far as characterization is concerned, Koné presents "types" as well as developed characters in the novel. For example, there are the low-down, ruthless scoundrels such as Habib, Doulaye, and Akafu; they are types of exploiters. There is Fatouma, a mother who exemplifies the traditional role of African women. She has been brought up to be submissive to males, especially her husband; nonetheless, she has the important role of caregiver for the family. There is Bakary, a faithful friend who has not forgotten about traditional African values, like respect, honesty, and hospitality. There are also the fieldworkers, Mata and Drissa, and there is Mori Ba, the so-called "saintly" *marabout* who is nothing but a hypocrite. As for the policemen, they are only "typical" representations of instruments of oppression in society. The roles of characters such as Mamadou, Tièfi, Shia, and Lassinan, are developed in the novel. In addition, Lassinan's and Shia's roles further develop in Courses, volume two of Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros. Now as husband and wife, they continue the struggle together in the hope that they will be instrumental in raising the level of consciousness of the peasants, in helping them to be fully aware of their exploitation and of the necessity to resist it.

Like Les Saisons sèches, Traites is also a novel of situations; the book has no plot, as Koné happened to say.[43] Furthermore, it is a "récit-exposé" in which Koné unveils a

[43] See interview question with Koné, Chapter 2, p. 56—"Can you situate your novel, Traites?"

gallery of portraits, or rather, characters. There are certainly a plethora of them in the text and, thanks to the author's rendering of dialogue, they seem to come to life right before the readers' eyes. Koné has told a convincing story in which he describes Africa's peasant community and all the trials and tribulations it must endure in a corrupt society. Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros is engaging, at times humorous, and altogether straightforward. The story will no doubt elicit strong emotions in the reader who will grasp the severity of the situation presented and will understand the need for a change. The reader will, indeed, become aware of the socio-political atmosphere and economic effects created by certain life conditions.

Koné's Use of Language in Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros

Reading Traites, one will discover that Koné does make use of a certain number of African words and expressions; he seems to be one of those writers who are strongly attached to their native language(s). As declared by the critic Georges N'Gal, "If one has to look for a distinctive characteristic or feature of the African writer, it is because his writing is shaped or enriched first of all by his mother tongue and then by other African languages" (118). Throughout the narrative, Koné intentionally renders the exact African words in either his mother tongue or any one of the other African languages he speaks.[44] He does so because they cannot adequately be expressed in the French language. In

[44] Koné speaks Senufo, his mother tongue, as well as Dyula, Malinke, Bambara, and a little Anyi. Koné thinks in his native languages, but he also thinks and, above all, writes in French. There are references in the text that the person behind the character is not Francophone. Old Mamadou, for instance, is one of those characters: "He [the school director] was speaking in French and Mamadou could not understand anything" (my translation; see chapter 4, p. 95). There are also instances where the characters speak in French with occasional words from other languages: "He [Mamadou] said the prayer in his home. After the *fatiha*, he mumbled things in Arabic that he didn't understand. Then, he finished the grievances in Dyula" (my translation; see chapter 4, p. 90). Those characters who do speak French, such as Lassinan, Shia, and the school director's wife, are able to communicate with the peasants in their African language. They are even able to communicate for them in French, as is the case for Mamadou who, along with Shia, must go to the city concerning his brother-in-law's wrongful arrest. Shia is the one who speaks to the City Police Chief because "she understands city talk" (my translation; see chapter 5, p. 135).

addition, he chooses to translate the native words and expressions into French for the reader. For example, on page 42 of Traites, the narrator relates: "Il y avait encore le *mogoya*, une grande considération des relations humaines" [The *mogoya* was still there—a great respect for human relationships]. Also in a footnote, Koné provides a definition in French for the African word *bangui*, which means palm wine. The reader can conclude that the French language does not fully communicate the African thought; the author clearly seems to think so based on the fact that he supplies a translation or definition in French for the African words. Koné retains the African words and simply translates them in an effort to convey their meaning. From the examples mentioned above, the reader acquires a meaning of two Malinke concepts known as *mogoya* and *bangui*.[45]

One also finds this style of writing in other African texts written in French, especially those written by authors from Koné's generation. For example, Tidiane Dem (Masseni, 1977) writes the exact African words in his text. The author either translates the word into French directly in the narrative—*Matiguitié* [Maître]—or he uses a footnote to explain what the term means—*Sigisbée*: cavalier servant d'une dame. Denis Oussou-Essui (Les Saisons sèches, 1979) also translates the words directly in the story—*Yako*! *Yako*! *Yako-o-o-o*! [Courage! Courage! du Courage!]. Régina Yaou (Lezou Marie ou les écueils de la vie, 1982) uses footnotes to define certain African words in her novel—*Djantra*: dame de petite vertu, jeune fille aux mœurs légères. Koné and these authors

[45] I appreciate Amadou Koné's help with regards to supplying me with a reference to the specific language (Malinke) for the African words, *mogoya* and *bangui*.

demonstrate in their respective works their ability to "Africanize" the French text by using words from their own African languages.[46]

The "Africanness" of Koné's Traites is not limited to African words. There are various elements, for example, of oral tradition, which also reveal the "Africanness" of his French text. The author's prose style is, indeed, reminiscent of African oral literature. He includes elements which belong to traditional African folklore, such as proverbs, repetition, and songs. With regards to proverbs, Ruth Finnegan, an expert on oral literature, writes the following in her book, Oral Literature in Africa:

> The exact definition of "proverb" is no easy matter. There is, however, some general agreement as to what constitutes a proverb. It is a saying in more or less fixed form marked by "shortness, sense, and salt" and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it. (393)

The element of truth or self-evidence of proverbs enables proverbs to be believed as truths. They have a persuasive force and, therefore, are often used to illustrate, explain or argue a point.

In the following example taken from Traites, Mamadou uses a proverb to try and convince the headmistress, Shia. Once Tièfi is released from prison, Mamadou explains to Shia the family's difficult position concerning the struggle in the village. He specifically makes use of a proverb to highlight the kind of action his son, Lassinan, should take once he has told the truth about the evils of the post-independence society in which his family and the other peasants live. He relates:

> Lassinan always says the same thing too, but how can we fight? Yesterday, Tièfi defended himself. He slept in jail. Without you, I don't know how many days he would have spent there, nor how many francs I would have been forced to slip

[46] Linguists call this device, "code-switching." Code-switching is "the alternating use of two or more recognizably different language variants (varieties of the same language, or different languages) within the same text." Sándor Hervey and Ian Higgins, Thinking Translation: A Course in Translation Method: French to English (London; New York: Routledge, 1992) 248.

> them into their hands. In the village, Lassinan has always struggled, but he doesn't understand that the proverb says: "A sincere man buys a good horse to get away when he has told the truth." So we always have problems. Finding him a way out was quite a chore.[47]

Because of Lassinan, there are always problems. And Mamadou resorts to a proverb in order to get this message across to Shia. Here, it is a short statement, as is the case for most proverbs. The proverb also reflects Mamadou's inherent wisdom; indeed, the older generation understands the importance of transferring wisdom through the use of proverbs. But they are not the only elements found in Traites that are tied to oral tradition. There are also several instances of repetition.

Koné repeats certain phrases or word groups in order to emphasize the importance of some aspect in the narrative. For example, the author writes "les riches sont puissants et ils se comprennent" [the rich are powerful and they understand each other] several times to stress that the elite social class is in control of the present situation in which the peasants find themselves. When Koné repeats "avec quelle bouche mange-t-on et avec laquelle parle-t-on" [what mouth do we eat with and which one do we speak with], he is trying to emphasize the importance of not speaking at the table when it comes time to eat. In addition, one must respect both the food and those with whom the meal is taken according to African custom. The subtitle of the book—Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros [Under the Blakoros' Power]—is also repeated throughout the narrative. This important word group acts as a constant reminder of the peasants' position in society; they need to overcome the *blakoro* who are in power. Koné repeatedly calls to the peasants' attention their social condition because he wants to create in them a desire for change. It is evident that Koné's use of repetition helps him to enhance the oral-like qualities of the narrative.

[47] My translation. See chapter 5, Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power, p. 138.

Songs are an additional element that reveals how the narrative strategy of Traites arises from the rich African oral traditions. For instance, whistling or singing songs while laboring in the fields is very common, in spite of the strenuous work conditions:

> At dawn, they covered themselves with ashes or some other unsavory powder to protect themselves from the constant bite of red ants which some coffee trees were packed with. And with basket in hand, they gathered precious fruits while whistling love songs or work songs.
> "Beautiful girl, wait for me.
> When I have plenty of money
> I will give you the greatest of dowries
> Be patient, beautiful girl."[48]

Songs help the laborers, who work collectively in the field, to forget the worries and sufferings of everyday life in the village. "It is a common pattern," according to Ruth Finnegan, "for stories to be interrupted from time to time by a song" (244). She goes on further to say that "sometimes these songs amount to quite long poems, and are then often in recitative. Short verses are also very common [. . .]" (244). Altogether, songs give rhythm and melody to the narrative and thus, further emphasize the oral-like quality of the novel. Koné recalls his own linguistic and cultural heritage by using such elements as songs, repetition, and proverbs. The novel Traites is a good example of a number of African creative texts written in French that have been influenced by African oral tradition.

In an attempt to resolve the problem of rendering exactly his African ideas, feelings, and thoughts in French, Koné decides to employ French words whose meanings are contingent on the significations that these words have in his African language. In Traites, for example, the word "soleil" appears eleven times. This is a prime illustration of an expression that comes from an African language. When one reads the French,

[48] My translation. See chapter 5, Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power, p. 152.

"même sous ces soleils où le monde est à l'envers, " the word "soleil" obviously does not mean "sun" here. It suggests rather the Malinke concept of "era, time, or period." Readers of African literature are already familiar with the expression used by the Côte d'Ivoire author, Ahmadou Kourouma, in his novel Les Soleils des Indépendances (Gassama 81). On page 18 of Traites, Koné also writes "L'école s'ouvre dans quinze jours" [School opens in 15 days]. Because of the verb, one realizes that this is an expression borrowed from an African language, particularly Dyula.[49] In standard French, one will usually see written "l'école commence" rather than "l'école s'ouvre." Koné has obviously adopted French to the lexicon of certain African languages.

The language in Koné's text is also metaphoric. This is another element that highlights the originality of his style. There are two particular instances in the novel where this is evident. For example, the author writes: "le *marabout* avait fini lui-même." This is obviously the literal translation of a metaphor taken directly from one of Koné's native languages; it signifies that the *marabout* has died. Another metaphor exists in chapter 3, part 2 of Traites. Koné writes: "Calmez-vous, intervint quelqu'un, refroidissez vos cœurs." Here the metaphor, which has been taken from the author's African language, makes reference to the temperament of certain individuals; they need to calm themselves down and not get all worked up over a certain situation. Altogether, a look at Koné's use of language in Traites reveals a distinctly African style of French prose to the reader.

[49] Amadou Koné informed me of the African language from which this expression comes.

The Task of Translating Traites into English

I now discuss the choices made, as well as the problems encountered when translating Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros. First of all, I am dealing with the translation of a nonrelated language and culture (that is, African) with related languages and cultures, particularly European and Anglo-American. The translation process is certainly one of acculturation, and there are consequences to consider at all linguistic levels, such as the translation of words, the rendering of syntax, and the coherence between sentences. Obviously, I needed an effective approach to bring the text across in the target language and culture.

As the translator of Amadou Koné's Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros, I am dealing with an African author who expresses "African thoughts" in French. According to Paul Bandia, a scholar in the field of Translation Studies, this kind of process can be referred to as the "primary level of translation, that is, the expression of African thought in a European language by an African writer" (61). Moreover, I had the task of translating the author's European language into Anglo-American. This is known as the "secondary level of translation, i.e. the 'transfer' of African thought from one European language to another by the translator" (61). Bandia calls the entire process a "double transposition process." My goal in following this process was, of course, to produce a reliable translation for English-speaking readers, always keeping in mind that I was undertaking the translation of a French text with devices reminiscent of African oral tradition into an Anglo-American text.

In my early attempts, my English translation turned out to be too close to the original French. In order to respect Koné's individual style of writing, I went too far in

trying to follow his French, especially his word order and sentence structure. Consequently, I produced a stilted English which did not reflect his tone and rhythms in the French language. My own personal style in English was unusual since I retained too much of the French structure. In order to capture Koné's rhythms and the orality of his prose, I had to consider not only the "words," but also the discourse. In linguistics, discourse serves as "the rough equivalent of speech, that is, language as actually used by the speaker (parole), as opposed to language as a system of signs (langue)" (Makaryk 535).[50] I discovered that I had to go from discourse to discourse in my English translation and not from sign to sign, so that I could capture the nuances and rhythms of the language articulated by Koné. Henri Meschonnic explains the process best in his book, Poétique du traduire:

> You cannot continue to think any longer in usual terms of the sign. You do not translate language (*langue*) anymore. Or in that case, you ignore discourse (*discours*) and writing. You have to translate discourse and writing. Even the banal.[51]

In order to precisely render the discourse, I sought out 2 native English speakers with no knowledge of the French language. They listened to the English text, and this exercise in turn helped me to eliminate some of the instances where my French interfered with my English.

There does appear to be less punctuation in Koné's text. This initially led me to add several marks of punctuation, particularly commas, to the rather long sentences

[50] The terms "langue" and "parole" were introduced by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, in order to separate two of the meanings of the word "langage." Roughly speaking, "langue" is the language system of a particular language community, while "parole" is speech, the way in which members of the community actually use the system.

[51] My translation. Henri Meschonnic, Poétique du traduire (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1999) 12.

written by the author. Ultimately, I decided to eliminate these commas which did not appear in the original text because they broke the rhythm of Koné's sentences. Also, there are many instances where Koné uses stressed pronouns and their respective subject pronouns to emphasize the spoken language in the text; this is otherwise known as *mise en relief* in French. In spoken language, emphasis can be expressed by intonation, pitch, stress and even gesture, none of which is available to written expressions. Emphasis, or *mise en relief*, allows one segment of an utterance to stand out. Thus, I had to choose the best way to emphasize, for example, "Je mange avec le Préfet, moi" in written form.

One obvious way to translate the sentence would be: "Me, I eat with the Prefect." However, this structure would be considered grammatically incorrect in English. I looked at English translations from the French, notably the unpublished translation of Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel [The Threshold of the unreal] by Mary Lee Martin-Koné to see how she handled the grammatical point. Interestingly, Martin-Koné does not even keep the emphasis in her English translation: "En tout cas, lui Karfa avait été accablé par les coups d'une fortune hostile [. . .]" [In any case, Karfa had been wracked by the blows of hostile fortune.] (9). My example, "Je mange avec le Préfet, moi", can be translated two different ways: "As for me, I eat with the Prefect" or "*I* eat with the Prefect" (italicized subject). The reader will notice the latter form applied primarily throughout the English translation.

The French indefinite pronoun "on" is also used throughout the French text. For the most part, I translated the pronoun into English as either "one, they, we, or people," depending on the context. In Traites, the narrator tells the story but does not appear as a character in the text. As we know, Gérard Genette names this kind of narrator

"*hétérodiégétique*." In Figures III, Genette makes a distinction between two different types of narratives:

> [. . .] one by a narrator who is not a character in the story he is recounting [. . .], the other by a narrator who is present as a character in the story he is recounting [. . .]. I call the first type, for obvious reasons, *hétérodiégétique*, and the second *homodiégétique*.[52]

However, in the first few sentences of the last chapter of part 2, I felt that Koné wanted to introduce a narrator in the story when he used the pronoun "on." This led me to translate the French "on" as "we" in the English text. In doing so, this collective narrator becomes, in fact, a character like the peasants. Now, condemning the evils of the independent African nation, the humiliations, economic exploitation, and administrative corruption is *their* problem. They must pull together and work together as one group to overcome the current aggressive capitalist system dominating their society.

I have, of course, retained all the African and Arabic words of the original text in my English translation. The words, which have been translated into French by Koné, are translated into standard English. For instance, "*naforo*, l'argent," becomes "*naforo*—money" and "*ségués*, des paniers ventrus," becomes "*ségués*—balloon-shaped baskets." This is also true for the names of characters and places. I do not change the orthography of the proper names or names of places so that English readers can pronounce the words more easily. Nor does Martin-Koné, for that matter, in her unpublished translation of Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel. Adrian Adams, on the other hand, found the need to do just that in his translation of Les Soleils des Indépendances [The Suns of Independence]: *Doumbouya* [Dumbuya]; *Tiécoura* [Chekura]; *le mont Tougbé* [Mount Tugbe]. I want to preserve the original words as they are, specifically because of their link to African

[52] My translation. Gérard Genette, Figures III (Paris: Seuil, 1972) 252.

culture. I have also included a helpful glossary of all the foreign words and indicated to which languages they belong: thus *balafon* (Malinke), *El Hadj* (Arabic), to name a few.

"*Traites*" is perhaps the most difficult and yet most important word I had to translate. The word itself has several meanings: trade, traffic, journey, transport, exportation, draft, bill, milking (Larousse 1023). The word is present throughout the narrative and is cleverly used in different contexts, which would indicate that it exploits the different meanings. In my interview with Koné, I expressed doubt as to whether one could find a single translation for the word *traites*? He explains:

> It is very ambiguous. I think you have to show all the nuances, so you cannot just translate it with one word. You can think of it as the crop when the fruit is ripe and ready to be sold, but it goes much further than that. It is also the exploitation of the people or the people whom they milk, like a cow. (Interview 2002)

"*Traites*" appears in the story as "la traite du café" [coffee crop/trade]; "traire les pauvres" [milk the poor]; and "tout d'une traite" [all in one breath]. Indeed, considering the various meanings of the word *traites*, Koné's response, and the subject matter of the novel has led me to translate the title of Amadou Koné's narrative as Exploitation, Under the Blakoros' Power.

Translating Amadou Koné's Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros was quite a challenge. The process was difficult and I faced many problems. But the overall experience was rewarding. The translation of Koné's novel is important for me in that I bring the sense of this source text into the new language, that being English, thereby widening the readership of Francophone African Literature, and specifically literature from Côte d'Ivoire. The English translation may even appeal to some potential researchers who, otherwise, might have been hindered by the problem of language. Therefore, both readership and scholarly interest in Koné's novel will be expanded with

this translation. It is my hope that one day, Amadou Koné's Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros will be discussed in African literature courses, especially since there are now an increasing number of them being offered in universities throughout North America.

CHAPTER 2
INTERVIEW WITH AMADOU KONÉ

Martin: Mr. Koné, I would like to begin by thanking you for having this interview with me. Can you first of all tell me about your origins, your family life, and your religion?[53]

Koné: My parents belonged to the Senufo ethnic group of northern Burkina Faso. I, however, was born in the south of Burkina Faso, which was formerly known as Upper Volta. Then we migrated to the southern part of Côte d'Ivoire in the forest region. My parents were planters. They worked the land in Burkina Faso and then moved down to Côte d'Ivoire where they produced coffee and cocoa plantations. They were peasants. I had a very simple childhood. During the first five or six years, I basically lived on a farm until I was old enough to go to the school in another village. As for religion, I am a Muslim; I come from a Muslim family. I give alms and I also practice the religion, but I am not a fanatic. I have to say that Côte d'Ivoire was, until a certain time, an interesting country from a religious standpoint because there were maybe a few more Muslims than Christians, the Christians being Catholic and Protestant. I believe the relationship between Muslims and Christians was very interesting in Côte d'Ivoire because there was no problem; one could not care less if you were this or that, that is, until recently with political events. It has certainly changed. Now, there is a kind of religious exploitation and ethnic groups are also talking politics, which is becoming very dangerous.

Martin: What is your mother tongue?

Koné: It is Senufo. The Senufo people can be found in the south of Burkina Faso, the north of Côte d'Ivoire, and also in Mali. The Senufo ethnic group has always lived a little with the Malinke people, so generally, they also speak Malinke. In any case, Senufo is my mother tongue; it is the African language I speak best. I speak Dyula, like most Senufo people, but not all Dyula people speak Senufo. I also speak Malinke, Bambara, and a little Anyi. The Anyi people belong to the Akan group found in parts of Côte d'Ivoire. I speak Anyi because my parents settled in an area where the Anyi people lived, in order to plant coffee and cocoa.

[53] This interview was conducted on January 25, 2002, at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. I interviewed Amadou Koné in English. He explained that his English language expression was not perfect, therefore, he answered my questions in French. The interview was transcribed and, then, translated into English. While I have faithfully transcribed and translated the interview, I have had to do some minor editing.

Martin: And what percentage of the population, would you say, speaks your mother tongue?

Koné: French is, of course, the main language. However, if you consider those who are in Burkina, in Mali, and in Côte d'Ivoire, there are maybe 30 million people who speak Senufo. But you have to understand that it is a family of small languages that are quite different. For example, Tcerama and Karaboro are distinct Senufo dialects. They have the same linguistic structures and certain words are the same, but they are different. Senufo is not just one language and not everyone understands it. It is a group of dialects that resemble one another and which make up the Senufo language.

Martin: And of course you speak French and also English. Are there any other languages you speak?

Koné: Yes, I speak a little German and Spanish.

Martin: Where did you learn the French language? Can you talk a little about that experience?

Koné: I began to learn French in elementary school. My brother was a teacher and I was in his class, so it was not a shock, strictly speaking. Learning French was quite natural for me. I studied like everyone, like all the Africans, in middle school, high school, and at the university. And since I loved to read, I read in French and I began to write in French.

Martin: As for your educational background, you attended middle school in Grand-Bassam and high school in Abidjan. Can you describe your life as a high school student during Independence?

Koné: My high school life was very simple. When I was in high school, the conditions in Africa were good. The country was stable, socially, and those first years of Independence were exciting. Independence had just been attained, colonization was over, and the future seemed altogether positive. So the young people were happy. They knew that if they worked hard, they would have a good job later on. So there was no problem. The environment was completely different from today's where young people find themselves in a really terrible situation. They have no perspective, and truly neither goals nor prospects. But high school was about work and friends; it was quite a pleasant life, which I described in Les Frasques d'Ébinto. The Abidjan High School was a boarding school. You might have a different image of life at a boarding school, but it was very pleasant there. It was simple; you get up, you study, you eat, you play sports, and you have fun. That was high school life for me.

Martin: And then you went on to study at universities in Abidjan and France. You studied literature and, specifically, you researched West African literature as a Humboldt Fellow. Why did you decide to teach and do research on African literature?

Koné: That was a bit by chance. I did it only because I loved literature. I loved to read and write ever since middle school. And then, naturally, I earned a B.A., and later an M.A., etc. So one thing led to the next. This is actually something I have not thought about. Maybe I regret it. I probably should have done something else because teaching does not help me much with my writing, and the research and literary analysis are different from writing fiction.

Martin: Why do you write?

Koné: I began writing at an early age but at a time when the colonial problems had been resolved, at least from a legal standpoint. From the start, I did not write to criticize or defend anything. I wrote tales and traditional stories that I had heard during evening gatherings. I also invented stories which attempted to describe my "vision of the world," "my experience." I considered literature a game where the imagination took delight in creating a universe where the writer was in charge. Then, I realized that writing could not be a simple game, but rather a responsibility I had towards my readers. From then on, I had to figure out a way to bring together traditional African values and Western industrial values. I was also concerned about the relations between people in present-day African society. So I write to try to clarify the rules of the game. I write to encourage the exploited to understand these rules and refuse all kinds of abuses. However, just as I became aware that literature could not be a game, I also realized that I had few answers to offer my readers. Therefore, I had to ask myself the important questions that were of interest to my country, my continent, and my world. And I continue to write because of the pleasure I receive from expressing myself and liberating myself from my obsessions. I write because it allows me to think intensely about "privileged moments." Though I do not try to fool myself about the power of literature, I also write because I believe that literature has always contributed to making humanity more human.

Martin: When did you realize that writing was what you wanted to do?

Koné: Well, it just so happened that I have done it because it was fun, since middle school or high school.

Martin: Does inspiration play an important role when your write? Is it necessary?

Koné: Yes, I think it is necessary. First of all, the word, inspiration, is difficult to define. One can, however, consider it a force that puts you in a trance, that is, you become inspired, you are a little outside of reality and it helps you do things that you did not think about in reality. I think it is important. If you do not have inspiration when writing a novel on a certain subject, you end up writing a very dry novel. So it is necessary.

Martin: Which native languages have influenced your French, thus, your style of writing, grammar, etc.?

Koné: Malinke and Dyula, more than Senufo.

Martin: Why is that? And why don't you write in Senufo?

Koné: Senufo is not a widely spoken language as it is only used by a small group of people.[54] I would have liked to write in Senufo because the images would certainly be much more colorful than the ones I try to use or express in the French language. But I do not write in my language because I have a very small audience. As a matter of fact, the people can read in French but are unable to read in Senufo because that is something entirely different. They would have to be able to read and write in Senufo. It is not easy.

Martin: What is your process when writing? Do you work with an outline or notes, etc.?

Koné: It is very eclectic, that is, I do not have just one way of writing. It depends on the topic. For certain topics, I do not make an outline. For example, I get inspired and begin writing. That inspiration pushes me, one thing leads to the next, and the story develops. And, then, I can make an outline for other subjects, but once I begin writing, it turns out to be different from the original. So it depends on the subject and on the moment.

Martin: Have you already thought about the kinds of characters and their roles before you write or are your characters developed as you are writing?

Koné: I think about the main characters. That is important because they lead the action. I generally know what a certain character symbolizes and, often, the whole society develops around these main characters. So you do need a minimum of such characters. As for the others, you can add them later to enhance the protagonists.

Martin: How would you define the role of a writer, in particular one from an African society?

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[54] Here, Koné is obviously referring to a small group of people in Côte d'Ivoire.

Koné: A writer has to describe his society and understand social problems. I do not think a writer can solve the problems. However, he can at least present them in such a way that those who are capable of solving them may think about these problems and attempt to solve them. But when you imagine it this way, you are led to think a little more on political questions. Writing is a kind of fake action because, on the one hand, you have action, and on the other, you have writing, and the two must come together to be truly effective. In the past, I thought a writer did not have to commit himself politically; I thought it would be enough if he simply wrote, but now, perhaps I think differently.

Martin: Which authors do you feel have influenced you the most?

Koné: In the beginning, I read French literature practically until I got to the university. So I was obviously influenced by this literature, the romantic writing, and authors like Victor Hugo and Chateaubriand. I was particularly interested in André Malraux when I began to read twentieth century literature. I was drawn to his writing because of the type of heroism he described in the Orient, which was the setting for these books. He described an awakening of the Orient with a certain nationalism that was developing there, which made me think a little of Africa. But, obviously, African and Caribbean literatures have influenced me. Among those writers, I think Aimé Césaire has influenced me. Although I do not share his style of writing, I think he is a very important writer. I am a great admirer of Birago Diop and of Léopold Sédar Senghor's poetry, which is different from Césaire's. All of these writers have had an influence on me in one way or another because they have shaped my literary taste. But my taste in writing is obviously quite eclectic. I must say though that Ahmadou Kourouma's influence is the determining factor. I think he has succeeded at something on the level of language, but not just the level of language. When you know African culture at the level of expressing the culture, that is something extraordinary. Thanks to the Africanized French language, Kourouma succeeds more than anyone in translating African culture in the most expressive way. The one who knows this culture and how it is expressed in African languages sees how Kourouma plays on reality and the two languages, that is, African and French. I am not a big fan of his latest novel, but a novel, such as Monnè, outrages et défis, I find to be very important. So I am interested in Kourouma's writing.

Martin: Where do you place yourself in the context of West African literature? Where does your fiction fit in Francophone African literature?

Koné: I must say that my attitude vis-à-vis writing is a very personal and individualistic attitude. I write about things that I enjoy and that interest me. I am not concerned about placing myself in a movement or placing

myself here or there. And criticism has no affect on me. That is why I write what pleases me and in a way that pleases me.

Martin: Among the literary genres, the novel and theater seem to be of more interest to you. Why are you fascinated by these two genres?

Koné: Theater seems to be a genre that touches the audience more than the novel because it is performed in public. The audience takes it in and there really is not much distance between it and the stage. The ideas are immediately conveyed to the spectators who, in a way, react together. In my opinion, it is a method of consumption that is effective. If you want to talk about society, theater is much more effective than the novel. I think the novel is not as effective because it is received individually—you are alone, you read your novel, you are happy or you are sad. It is difficult to share this with someone else. Even if that person reads the novel, he or she will perhaps feel something different.

Martin: What kind of reaction have you gotten regarding your books, specifically Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros?

Koné: I think the reaction has been quite positive, but it depends on which book. For example, Les Frasques d'Ébinto has sold very well and the book is in high schools all over Africa, like Côte d'Ivoire, the Congo, and Guinea. The plays have also gotten a good response. Traites and Courses won the Senghor prize at the same time, so they were well received by the public. Yes, it is true, there was some criticism of Traites. Critics thought the novel was too short and that I had held back from making it much longer. It is true, but that is what I wanted because the plan, when I wrote Traites, was to get the people who are concerned over these problems, that is, the peasants themselves, to read the text. If they were more or less literate, they should be able to read these books and understand them. That is why Traites is written the way it is written. So the fact that I wished to appeal to a certain readership generated criticism of the novel.

Martin: What other kinds of criticism have you received in Africa?

Koné: Some say that I deal with too many social problems in the novel and that I need to abandon or forget the problems a little and write a novel where one can dream. The kind of criticism received will depend on the novels, the people, and the plans. And perhaps that is the problem. I do not write for critics. I write what I enjoy writing.

Martin: Lilyan Kesteloot considers you as one author of the "regional" novel. She writes that this novel is "more deeply rooted in a particular locality and a specifically rural one which aims at an in-depth exploration of the peasant mind, and at times takes over from ethnology. Its preoccupations are

limited to the village level and it stands aloof from national or international politics. It is written in a sober, very controlled, often classical prose. Its object is to conjure up the 'Africa of the bush' confronting itself."[55] Do you agree with her?

Koné: Critics distinguish between the regional novel and the Parisian novel. But what is a regional novel? If you write about a small region near Bordeaux, are you writing a regional novel? This is not my definition; this means nothing. I agree that the book describes a particular locality, though it is not as specific as it could be. I think the problems described in these books are the same for all regions where, for example, coffee is grown, such as regions of the forest in Africa, in Cameroon, and the Congo. So the book is not as locally defined as that. This is always the problem with French critical expressions like "regional novel."

Martin: How do you feel about translations?

Koné: I do not have a problem with translations. For example, I have read Russian literature, which I like, in French. In the beginning, I read American novels in French. Therefore, it seems to me that translations are necessary. When I was in high school, I would read tales by Edgar Allan Poe, but in French. So I think translations are necessary to reach a wider audience.

Martin: You have said that your wife has translated a few of your books into English, but that they have not yet been published. Which books has she translated? A gentleman was also in the process of translating Les Frasques d'Ébinto. Has that translation been completed? Published?

Koné: My wife has not finished translating Les Coupeurs de têtes. It is too bad because there were publishing houses that wanted to print the text. But so far, she has not finished. Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel was translated a long time ago, but probably because of my carelessness, we did not really look for a publisher because I would always say to myself, "no, I am going to write better books later on." So I do not know if this was a good strategy, but that is what I did. And as for the young man who translated Les Frasques d'Ébinto, he did, but it has not been published yet; we have to find a publisher. Two of my plays have also been translated into English, but not published: De la chaire au trône (Mary Lee Martin-Koné) and Les Canaris sont vides [The Bins are empty] (Armand Falk). So we have all these texts that are translated but not published. Perhaps we will begin with your translation.

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[55] Lilyan Kesteloot, "Turning Point in the Francophone/African Novel: The Eighties to the Nineties," New Trends and Generations in African Literature, eds. Eldred Jones and Marjorie Jones (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1996) 10.

Martin: Have any of your books been translated into African languages?

Koné: There are no written translations of my books in African languages. However, the play, Le Respect des morts, has been orally translated. One year, in the Anyi village where a particular scene takes place, young students performed the play in the village language. So all the old people came to hear the language. It was very nice.

Martin: French is the official language of Côte d'Ivoire, but dozens of African languages are also spoken there. I've read that Bambara, Malinke, and Dyula are all dialects of the Mande language. How closely related are these languages? And Malinke is often called Dyula. Is that right?

Koné: Yes, they are pretty much the same language with a few variations in tone and accent. Dyula is the popular Malinke; it is for popular use, for commercial use. It was the language spoken by shopkeepers all throughout West Africa before Independence and everyone easily understood it. Dyula is really the simplified form of Bambara and Malinke.

Martin: This is interesting because Dyula is the particular African language you mention in Traites. But you also include Arabic in the text. What is the role of this language?

Koné: Dyula is often mentioned in the text because before French, that was the language you spoke in the market place and everyone could understand the language. Yes, there are at times Arabic words in the text that are uniquely spontaneous expressions that we say under certain circumstances. That does not mean that the one saying those words understands Arabic. Maybe it is just a reflection of the society in which I live. If someone is happy, or if someone thinks he has done something good, I, in the text, often say, *alihamdoulilahi*. They are just words that appear spontaneously. For example, if you are surprised, you say *Allah akbar*, which is an exclamation; you are surprised to the point where you say God's name.

Martin: So most of the words in Traites are in Dyula or Malinke?

Koné: Yes, like the word *bangui*. That is a Malinke word. "Gui" means water, and *bangui* is the water from a palm tree; it is palm wine. *Allah yi en dè mbè* is also Malinke. It can be translated as "May Allah help us." *Bléké*, which means plantain or boiled cassava, is a Dyula word. So it is a mixture of Malinke or Dyula. But, *assalam alékoum, alékoum salam*, is Arabic.

Martin: Can you situate your novel, Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros?

Koné: In fact, I do not think the novel has much of a plot. It is not a novel that has a plot like Les Coupeurs de têtes. In some ways, Traîtes is a novel of scenes. What is important is the description of a situation, the different approaches to a situation, and the behavior of key characters who are tied to that situation, characters like Lassinan, Mamadou, etc.

Martin: Traîtes is set in Bambara society. Can you tell me more about this African milieu?

Koné: I try to describe a society of peasants, and not only Bambara peasants; it is a melange of people. It just so happens that the characters whom I talk about are Bambara and Anyi peasants, as well as peasants from other ethnic groups. The book is a kind of autopsy of a society of exploited people who do not have the education to understand the workings of that society. That is their biggest problem. And it won't help to just simply defend this group of people. Eventually, they need to be educated and, then, they will be able to defend themselves. Lassinan's and Shia's status as teachers is very important. They not only have the job of teaching children, but they also have to educate this class of peasants.

Martin: I think it is important that you have mentioned Shia, one of the women characters in the text. How would you describe the role of women in your books?

Koné: They have a very important role. From Les Frasques d'Ébinto to the latest novel, women have always been important in my texts. They are not simply spectators. They are actresses and, at times, essential ones. The roles played by women are really important, even in Traîtes where few women are present. I think women are not neglected in what I write.

Martin: Do you believe that Shia's role and the way she expresses herself, or rather the way you make her express herself, presents the freest expression of feminine discourse in Côte d'Ivoire literature?

Koné: I would have to say yes to that question. I do not know if it is just in literature, but in reality, women have always been, even in the struggle for Independence, the most aggressive pursuers of freedom. They fought, they were not afraid of being imprisoned and, strangely enough, they are a great expression of freedom in Africa, no matter what people say. There are texts that portray women as the obedient ones in society, but in certain situations, they show their capacity to be liberated and to speak freely. So yes, I do believe that Shia's role clearly represents modern women in Africa.

Martin: Was there any particular reason why you used different French words to describe the same kind of woman in Traites? For example, you write: "des filles de petite vertu, des filles de rue, des courtisanes, des femmes de petite vertu, des filles publiques."

Koné: First of all, I must say that the word *blakoro* mostly represents a category of people. The word translates into these people's total lack of education. A *blakoro* is a child. He is the one who has not been initiated. He is the one who is truly not capable of speaking before an audience and who does not have the right to speak, for that matter. It is interesting that these *blakoro* people now run the society. Such a state of affairs is backward and that explains why we have problems. But the feminine word that would correspond to *blakoro* and that would characterize this type of woman does not exist. It does not exist in reality, and this is very interesting, even in the African language. A *blakoro* is certainly a man, a boy, but there is no word for a woman. That is why I borrow all these French words which mean just about the same thing.

Martin: Do you express a certain opinion here of what education is all about? Can you explain exactly what "education" means for you?

Koné: In the context of Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros, education does not just mean attending a French school. It is also the knowledge of African culture in which an important part of society functions. One can be very educated without having gone to a French school. On the other hand, one can be educated at a French school and not know African culture.

Martin: *Blakoroya* and *mogoya* are two very important Malinke terms that appear in Traites. Can you explain what they mean?

Koné: *Blakoroya* is the idea. It explains the behavior of a *blakoro* and this behavior is not centered on human interests or values, in other words, the *mogoya*. *Mogoya* refers to humanism. It is the act of being human. It is the respect for all those ancestral values and *blakoroya* is the opposite.

Martin: Is it possible to find one translation for the word, "*traites*"?

Koné: It is very ambiguous. I think you have to show all the nuances, so you cannot just translate it with one word. You can think of it as the crop when the fruit is ripe and ready to be sold, but it goes much further than that. It is also the exploitation of the people or the people whom they milk, like a cow.

Martin: What is the function of Islam in the novel?

Koné: Actually, there is not much, except that most of the people described are Muslims. In the book, I do criticize the religious leaders, especially one *marabout* who flees, but I do not criticize Islam. I criticize these people because they have always gotten on my nerves, although I am Muslim. These religious leaders behave in a certain way. You listen to what they say, which is very proper, very strict, very this, very that, and then you observe what they do which is quite often the opposite of what they say. So, when I was a child, this contradiction and seeing these people would always shock me. In fact, if there is one problem with Islam in the novel, this would have to be it. There is a contradiction between the values professed by the religious leaders, not by the people who follow them, and then the failure of those who profess these values to respect them.

Martin: What is the significance of "Cocody, décembre 1972" found on the last page of Traites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros? You also do the same at the end of your other novels like Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel (Ayamé, 4 septembre 1969), Les Frasques d'Ébinto (Ayamé, 25 août 1970), and Courses, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros (Lagrasse, septembre 1975).

Koné: These novels are often written over a long period of time. This is actually a kind of definitive date where I tell myself that I am not going to touch that novel anymore. So I know it is finished at a certain time. If not, I would never finish. As long as the book has not gone to the publisher, you can always continue working on it. So these dates mark the end.

Martin: There is some confusion surrounding the third volume of your series. I read that Fuites, Sous le pouvoir des Blakoros was published in 1989, but that your latest novel, published in 1997 and entitled Les Coupeurs de têtes, was the third volume. Can you clarify all this for me?

Koné: In fact, Fuites has not been published, at least not under that name. I had planned on writing the book. The first 2 volumes were to be followed by a third called Fuites. But I did not write it. And then, later, I wrote Les Coupeurs de têtes. But at the last minute, right up until Les Coupeurs was published, I hesitated; I thought I could make Les Coupeurs the third volume. In the last analysis though, it did not become the third volume. There is a small trace in the novel that might make someone say that it is indeed the third volume because of one character, Abou, who is the main character in Courses. You find him in Les Coupeurs de têtes, but only a little. You do not see him, but he is discussed. So he is really the only tie between those two volumes.

Martin: Do you discuss your own books in the classroom, that is, are they a part of the required reading?

Koné: No, but this semester I am going to do so.

Martin: Which books?

Koné: The plays, because they deal with the place of tradition and modernism. And I think the two plays, De la chaire au trône and Le Respect des morts, treat best this problem. So we are going to read them, along with other books, of course.

Martin: Do you think it is important for a young scholar to interview the writer whose work he or she is studying?

Koné: Yes, I think it is important. It is always important, in my opinion, when the author is still alive to ask him or her questions. When the author is dead, you make what you want of the texts. But if you can sit down with the author for an interview, you can verify your hypotheses. The interview can help you clarify certain things that you did not think about. I do the same thing. If I write about Kourouma, I look forward to being able to meet with him in order to ask questions. So it seems very useful to me.

Martin: What are your plans? Do you have any works in progress?

Koné: Always. I have a novel that will be out in a short time called L'Œuf du monde, and L'Œuf du monde is a myth.

Martin: Where will you publish this book?

Koné: CEDA, always. That is because my audience is in Africa. My books are mostly read there. I have an audience, so I only publish there. And then, after that, I am thinking about writing a novel that will be much, much more extensive and that will be more desirable in the public's eyes. It will probably be a story that takes place in Africa or America. Since I now live here, I have to exploit the situation, but this is still in the beginning stages.

Martin: In conclusion, where do you see the future of Francophone African literature?

Koné: I think people will continue to see more and more Francophone literature. You never know. Perhaps Africans are going to begin writing in their languages because, obviously, French institutions had, as a goal to extinguish African languages and force the African, as usual, to write in French. But maybe with globalization, the French feel the weight of American culture. Since they are struggling with that, they are becoming more and more aware that the African must also protest French culture's need for domination. For example, this year or next year in Côte d'Ivoire, they are going to begin teaching African languages in school. They have

not done this in forty years, since Independence, but they are beginning now, and if it works well, other countries will follow. Who knows? Maybe in 10, 20 or 50 years, we will go back to a national language and those people who will be instructed in that language will be able to read. That is the problem now. People cannot read the African languages. They do study the languages in institutes of linguistics, but ultimately, people need to learn to read and write them; they need to learn to read and write Senufo. So this is interesting. In fact, it is not too late. It is possible to bring back these languages, at least the more prominent African languages, but not all of them because the less prominent ones are, no doubt, going to die out. But the more prominent languages will come back, and maybe one day, there will truly be an African literature.[56]

[56] Koné is referring to Dyula (Malinke/Bambara), Akan, Senufo, and Bété as "the more prominent" African languages in Côte d'Ivoire that will come back.

For YAHAYA, my quiet and gentle mother.

—Amadou Koné

For some readers

Just as every theme must influence the writing of the novel, every context must likewise determine the language used by the novelist. Of course, this problem is more complex in Africa. At any rate, it explains the difference in tone between Exploitation and the author's other works. The implicit narrator, not to be confused with the author, and the characters apply here a language adopted to their setting.

The author

CHAPTER 3
KONÉ'S PREFACE

This book is a cry.

The cry of a *blakoro* who has always maintained very solid ties with the people.

It is also, and especially, an autopsy; the autopsy of a degenerate society in which corruption has been institutionalized.

It is an acknowledgment of the failure of a liberation in which people had put too much hope.

For the colonized, bastardized, scorned, and starving African people, the end of the long colonial night and the coming of independence was supposed to constitute the beginning of a new era marked by the rehabilitation of values denied until then. Alas! Alas three times! It did not take into account that other race of abusive starvers created by colonization and coming forth from the very womb of Africans. The hope, born on the eve of liberation, was as great as the disappointment, afterwards, was immense.

The disappointed people assert a bitterness that Amadou Koné reveals to us. He traces for us the people's exploitation in a manner that sometimes is meant to be lax or casual. But, let's not be fooled. Amadou Koné has chosen a subject that is so delicate, so tragic, that only a tone of voice like the one he uses can allow him to speak of it without crying.

In fact, don't we feel like crying when we see the male nurse refusing to take care of a child on his deathbed just because they did not "grease his palm?" What other

feeling do we have for *El Hadj* Doulaye who, underneath his devout airs, is nothing but a despicable exploiter? And what about Habib and Mori Ba? And . . .

In the presence of all these characters, I experience a disgusting shudder and a revolting feeling. Disgusting shudder and revolting feeling born from the fact that ancestral values, like the *mogoya*, that immense respect for human relations, dignity, decency, and honesty, are scorned by the very sons of those values.

Thus, we witness in so-called modern Africa, the reign of the ones Amadou Koné calls *blakoros*. In Bambara society, the *blakoro* is a young boy not yet circumcised. He is therefore the young man who has not yet been initiated into real life. He does not have the right to speak out: he is not yet a man. Yet the disruption of colonization and independence put power back into the hands of the *blakoros*. Denying traditional values under the influence of Western rulers without having mastered, for that matter, the values brought to them from Europe, the *blakoros* establish a bastardized society by the widespread imposition of the *blakoroya*, which is no longer a temporary condition.

In this decaying universe that emits fetid odors, the characters of Lassinan and the headmistress are genuine models. They are there to explain to the people the new system of which the people are the victims. They are trying to teach them a means of resistance.

Undoubtedly, the author of this narrative knows these people. He knows their grief. He has remained attentive to the beating pulse of these people. And he also deserves our admiration because, despite the "decaying carcass," he believes in the Africa of tomorrow. He believes in crushing that race of jackals who rip out the country's guts. What a beautiful example of faith!

Amadou Koné's faith proceeds to cast a balm on my helpless heart. I was among those who, faced with the death of our values, had lost all hope of seeing Africans play an important role in tomorrow's world. But Koné's narrative has come in time to rescue me from my desolation and my uneasiness. He shows, if only tacitly, that Africa can still get back on her feet.

If you are a profiteer, an abusive starver of men, close this book immediately for it will jostle you into your stuffed armchair, it will make you miserable. But if, like me, you are a starved individual, read it. Perhaps it will help you, perhaps it will be of use to you like the luminous torch of hope that had momentarily flown away.

At a time when Africa, for so long kept in the dark, submits its candidature to be a continent of purity and salvation, it is essential that she rid herself of her shortcomings. Especially when one knows that these shortcomings are imported goods.

That is why the African author, spokesman of his community, must face up to his responsibilities, that is, he must denounce all forms of abuse, whoever the perpetrators may be and whatever origin they may have.

Confronted with all this, Amadou Koné has not failed. His narrative denounces and indicts those men who, uniquely for their own interests, are ready to squeeze the people until they are bone dry. It also denounces and indicts the accomplices of all these scoundrels.

It is this attitude that gives the author his strength and his power. Amadou Koné is a responsible writer. He is not one of those who, owing to some morbid instinct, are anchored in black pessimism. Nor does he belong to the race of unconscious people

swimming in blissful optimism. He is lucid, "a lucid visionary," as he happened to say one day.

This book raises questions and tries to propose solutions. It is certainly not an essay. Is it perhaps a poetic novel in which the author paints with emotion and sensitivity an African milieu that he knows perfectly well because he lives in it? The author says it is a tale. Perhaps. A tale where the French language itself has been fashioned to depict the African reality of a country that does not need a name and whose capital is Blakorodougou.

As for myself, I salute in Amadou Koné the African youth who, in post-independent times, feel fully conscious and responsible. I hail him as the one who alerts the conscience of African masses wronged, fooled, robbed, emptied of their substance.

And I admire his lucidity and his boldness.

Jésus Kouassi Yoboué.
Journalist at the R.T.I.

At dawn, even before the second cock's crow, the old *muezzin* would sing the *azan* in front of the small, gray-walled mosque with the rusted sheet metal roof. At the third call, confused and whitish figures in the half-light of dawn were trotting along towards the mosque to take part in the morning prayer; the fourth call was the last and right afterwards, the believers would stand up on their carpet or their sheepskin, turn towards the east, and would drop their prayer beads loudly to their feet.

Then began the prayer. The singsong voice of the *imam* was piercing the early silence and penetrating the meditative believers. Everyone was drawn to Allah-God. At that moment, they could truly see that Allah was up there. They felt his presence and totally accepted the idea that paradise was opened to all men—even to the poor—and that here below, the men were just passing.

The *imam* would sing, "*Allaho akbar*." And together, the faithful people would fervently resume this cry, a magic balm that used to calm the pain of the heart—in any case for a moment: "*Allaho akbar*—Allah is great." Thus began the morning greeting to the Most High.

Once the *fatiha* was let out, the *imam* would mumble in Arabic and Dyula an entire string of wishes and blessings that counted just as much for this earthly world as for the other: paradise. "*Allah yi sini di en ma, Allah yi en dè mbè, Allah ka nan en malo*!—God give us tomorrow, God help us, God protect us from shame!—*Amina*," the holy people answered. Once the prayer was over, they could then greet each other. And they returned home.

In the yards, women had been up for a long time. They had already made several

trips to the small river to draw the water of the day. They had swept the yard, washed the children, and prepared breakfast. They ate very early, right with the sunrise and then . . .

And then life continued.

The men would conscientiously file their machetes, loudly whistle for their dogs, then, by small groups, pour into the coffee and cocoa plantations. This was done in order to remove the weeds tangled under the precious bushes or to cut them back. Or still, men disappeared well into the forest to cut the rattan cane and the bamboo necessary for the preparation of the mats serving to dry the coffee or the cocoa beans.

That existence, which varied only with the seasons, was a process of constant renewal with the passing years. People, however, did not have time to be bored. They were living under a power that old Mamadou called, "the power of the *blakoros* and the girls of easy virtue." Everything seemed dissolute. Mercilessly, there reigned the civil servants, rich city merchants, and village usurers, the prophets of little influence. And the life of the peasants was without order, a life aimed at a little bit of happiness, but a life riddled with complications springing up from the slightest thing. Oh! This life subjected haphazardly to the mood of the powerful! Yes, those people were forever hoping for better tomorrows, but the days were always disappointing them. They were living from one coffee crop[57] to the next, at the two poles of the year, with a lot of hope and certain risks of disillusion.

[57] Here, the word "*traite*" appears for the first time in the text; in fact, the word appears throughout the text. See my interview with Koné for an explanation.

CHAPTER 4
PART ONE: A DIFFICULT PATH
TOWARD THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

One

Just as for any other meal, the entire family would eat breakfast together under the shed in the middle of the yard. It was some black coffee and a little *béléké*—plantain or cassava. Also at times, they would eat the leftovers from the evening that one had taken care to reheat and preserve carefully. Food is a sacred thing and the one who enjoys wasting it is an irresponsible person. Breakfast was eaten rather in silence, as were all the other meals. Let us respect those with whom we eat, let us respect the food we eat. What mouth do we eat with and which one do we speak with!

Even under these suns where the world was upside down, old Mamadou wanted the meal to remain a ritual. As in the past. And old Mamadou cared about his children's education, especially under these suns of the *blakoros* and prostitutes. It was not because he was poor that he was supposed to have children as insolent as baby goats. And during the meal, the old man would see to it that his three youngest children had, as a sign of respect for the old, their left hand placed on the edge of the main dish. But Mamadou's will to make real men of his children—oh, how many real men are there still in this world!—went beyond that. Children are links. Any man who fears Allah—and one must fear Allah—has to fulfil his duties towards them. Mamadou dedicated himself entirely to

them, even if it meant not being able to give free rein to the great dream that obsessed him.

Breakfast was over.

"When do you leave, Lassinan?"

Old Mamadou's tone of voice was almost indifferent. Nevertheless, one could detect there a hint of seriousness, even anguish.

"School opens in fifteen days," replied Lassinan.

"Already!" his uncle Tièfi exclaimed.

"Yes."

Lassinan was a calm boy, too calm even, people said. His self-control bordered on indifference. But behind that placidness was a mind in constant movement. Lassinan observed his father who, staring into space, seemed to have forgotten that he had just asked a question. He also took a quick glance at his two younger brothers. The news of the return to school had given Issa the chills; about ten years old, he was going into the fourth grade. On the other hand, Abou's eyes were sparkling with joy. He was six years old and was to go to school this year only. Two weeks from now, a good-looking khaki suit, brand-new shoes and off to discover the wonders of school life! Abou was so excited that he had not been able to sleep for a month. In fact, Issa thought, he truly had no idea what school was all about.

"I'm going to lose a half month's work," old Mamadou finally sighed. "And to think of those laborers today who can no longer bend down . . . They remain standing, damage the grass and claim to having cleared the field. One has to keep an eye on them so that the work is done correctly."

"I wanted to begin preparing the mats for the upcoming drying of the coffee beans. But since you will be busy with the children's return to school, I will work with the laborers," Tièfi said. "If Soulé were here, that would have simplified things."

There was a hush. Old Mamadou turned towards Lassinan.

"What are we going to do about Issa?"

"There is only the third grade here in the village. I believe we'll have to send him to the city. We have to find him a space at the city school, and also a good tutor, someone who won't turn him into a houseboy."

"It appears that you also insist on putting Abou in school?"

"Yes, Tièfi, he has to go to school. For him, there is no problem. We can enroll him here."

"No problem! With our civil servants, there are always problems," old Mamadou hollered. "Too many problems! Not even the ones we had when the white man ordered us around. At your age, there are things that you should understand. You insist that Abou also go to school. Agreed. But you do not seem to think about the difficulties I have. Abou is more useful to me here than in their school."

"When I say that he has to leave for school, I am only thinking about his future."

His tone of voice was as calm as usual. He wanted to say a lot of things, explain the situation. But solely out of respect for his father, he could accept being wrong here whereas, with other people, he would have easily shown that he was indeed right. He knew that a man was not supposed to behave in this manner. But his very strict Muslim upbringing had taught him that a father did not have the right to be wrong.

"I too think about your future," continued old Mamadou. "If not, do you believe I

would kill myself at my age in the field? Well, if *you* were at home, you would be very useful. But you have been there, at their school, for how long?"

"Eleven years."

"Eleven years! Do you realize! And besides, you are always over there, always. And I will have to take care of your younger brothers for eleven years more before they wind up where you are. Eleven years of a job that brings back nothing. If you had stayed home, you would have surely plowed fields that would produce right now.

"Lassinan, the days are going by and I am tired."

He regretted that the conversation had come to that. He knew his son well—a very sensitive boy who quickly grasped all the allusions. He was sorry for having spoken in such a way.

"One day, I hope to be useful to you, *baba*," Lassinan said. "With Allah's help and your blessings. The world is changing too quickly and one does not often have the strength to follow its changes. That is why Abou must leave for school. We don't know what tomorrow has in store for us and if you don't send him to school, one day he will go to your grave to accuse you of having made him a failed man. He will accuse you and he will accuse me as well. I simply want us to give him his chance."

"If only you had begun to help me . . ."

Lassinan sighed. Abou looked at him with worried eyes, imploring eyes almost. Perhaps he grasped vaguely that his life was hanging in the balance there, that morning, between a father crushed by financial difficulties and an older brother, lucid but powerless . . . Perhaps he was simply reducing the drama to a playroom to which his father forbade him access.

"I cannot help you, *baba*. Not now. One day, God willing, you will forget your sufferings. But right now, it's not possible. They don't pay us at the lycée. We have just a small scholarship that covers room and board."

Old Mamadou calmed down. Perhaps simply because his son was bringing Allah into the conversation. That "God willing," was Lassinan saying it out of pure habit of having heard it since his childhood, or did he really think that Allah was guiding him in life? Indeed, that was a question the father often asked himself about a son who was troubling him. What disconcerted the old man about Lassinan's character was that self-control. These suns were the ones by which the son, hardly knowing how to wear the pants in the family and how to read the letter "*a*" spoke out loud in front of his father and insulted his mother. *Lassinan* had always spoken in an even tone. Never a word too many nor too loud. He compelled respect with his level-headed and well-thought-out attitude. This was a boy one could not help but respect.

"As you wish Lassinan," Mamadou surrendered. "Allah willing, Abou will go to school and Allah willing, we will survive."

"The schoolmasters are going to hit his fat head," teased Tièfi.

"Do schoolmasters hit the children now? They see to it that the parents are hit in another way. No, school is no longer like it was in the old days when the headmasters went to the most remote areas to take the children and forced them to enroll in school. Now, they refuse to take the children and then for that matter, what do the schoolmasters teach them? To tell you the truth, school is not the same anymore. Only one more way of 'milking' the poor.

"And it's not only here in the village, because over there, in Blakorodougou . . ."

Tièfi always spoke of Blakorodougou. The capital, Blakorodougou, had been his life for nearly forty years. He could not say two words without comparing the capital to the country.

"Over there," he continued, "only the rich send their children to school. The child's registration already costs too much money. Of course, school is free, but . . . And then, the tips here and there, the supplies to be bought . . ."

"All we have left to do now is go to the field," old Mamadou said.

"The farming civil servants are supposed to arrive today," Tièfi mentioned. "Last time, they said they would be coming today to take a look at the young plants."

"Good, then Lassinan, you will stay home. And you will drive them to the new cocoa tree plantation when they arrive. Oh! We must make them something; they will have to eat when they get back from the field. But what are we going to cook for them? These are civil servants; they cannot eat the same things as us. Where am I going to find a fat rooster or a plump chicken?"

"Why wouldn't they eat what we eat? Do you believe, *baba*, that at their home, at their parents' home, these civil servants eat a rooster at each of meal?"

"Well, my child, that is the way we welcome them. To make sure that their work on their plantation is better than somewhere else, some well-to-do people welcome them even with a really fat sheep. They've gotten them used to that; and us poor people suffer the most."

"Also in Blakorodougou," Tièfi continued, "the thing exists. So that the civil servants will quickly fill out a form we need, it's necessary to *adjossi*—grease their palm.

The rich created the custom and the poor have to follow. Only the rich always have the advantage; the poor, they lose without a doubt."

"Over there, in Blakorodougou, the blow goes far, very far. Only some things are better left unsaid.

"Abou, call your mother for me."

Abou left and immediately came back with his mother.

"Fatouma," old Mamadou said to his wife, "you know the farming civil servants are coming to visit the new cocoa field today."

"Yes. That's why I pounded a little rice yesterday. But, there is nothing for the sauce. Not even the smallest fish."

"Speaking of which, I wanted you to lend me . . . in fact sell me your rooster. On credit, of course. I will pay you at the end of the coffee harvest. There are a few months remaining and *tèrèti* is around the corner."

"Oh, no! You'll have to look elsewhere. When my children leave for school, I will surely have to give them money. Where do you want me to find it? I want to sell my rooster to someone who can give me some cash on the spot."

"And by the way," Tièfi interrupted, "I really don't know what's the use of your civil servants. Do they come to work or just to eat roasted chickens?"

"Be quiet, Tièfi. You always have to joke around, even when it comes to serious matters. So, Fatouma, are you going to humiliate me?"

The old woman kept quiet. She was not as old as one could imagine. She had prematurely aged, that's for sure. Throughout her poor peasant woman's existence, she had woken up very early, done very many domestic chores and also the fieldwork. She

kept having children, sacrificing herself for them, obeying her husband. All that was too heavy a responsibility that had worn her out too early.

She still kept quiet. But Lassinan knew that she would eventually give in. It was the same since his childhood. His father would gently con his mother. In order to take a chicken from her and offer it to a stranger, he would talk to his wife about buying that chicken from her. On credit of course. A debt which one would never speak of again.

Lassinan knew she was going to eventually give in, as usual. He was right.

Of course she gave in. What kind of a wife doesn't obey her husband? What child succeeds with a mother who doesn't worship her husband? In any case, after forty years of marriage with her husband, Fatouma had become his shadow. She knew what could bother him or please him. And she knew that herself, her children and all her hens belonged to Mamadou. Allah wanted it that way.

"What are you doing today?" Mamadou asked his wife again.

"I'm going to prepare the farming civil servants' meal, then I'll go gather some pepper and chop some wood because my firewood reserve is low. This afternoon, I'll go look for some cassava for the evening meal."

"Good," Mamadou said. "As for us, we are going to the new cocoa field. Lassinan is going to wait for the civil servants and will bring them to us when they arrive."

The two workers, Mata and Drissa, whistled for the dogs and the small group got under way.

Lassinan watched them leaving. His look was not at all indifferent. Rather indefinable. He admitted it to himself; the work in the field exhausted him in a flash.

And then, those pleasures he had in the past, when he was very young, breathing in the smell of the fields, running over fallen tree trunks, carving rifle butts, those pleasures had disappeared. The field for a man of a certain age is far from being a playing field or an amusement park. Lassinan understood that. Work in the field was painful, very painful. And his father and mother lived only from this work. His father, past fifty years old, still bent down with a machete in his hand; his mother still walked with a heavy load on her head.

And yet at eighteen years old, Lassinan was no longer good for anything, well, he could not yet be of any help to his parents. His father's words affected him in his heart of hearts. His father was right. If he had lived at home, he would have already cultivated some plantations. But what of it? He would perhaps be married, certainly have had children and then the problems would have still been the same: poverty, increasing and perhaps perpetual misery. But also, what was he good at with his eleven years spent at the French school? He probably could have gotten hired somewhere and tried to help his parents. But under these suns, how much money can a young civil servant earn with no special skill that allows him to help his parents? Upon receiving his Secondary School Certificate, he had thought about all these problems; he had wanted to leave school, begin working, earn a little money. He had talked about it to one of his European teachers. The latter had advised him to continue school because he was intelligent and destined for the greatest prospects. To this teacher, he had opposed the family's argument to help:

"My parents are old now and still poor. It's my turn to help them. They need me."

"Your parents have their life. You, you have your own that you must build meticulously while you still have the time."

"My parents have always taken care of me. They have sacrificed themselves so that I would succeed."

"That was their duty. God condemns parents who neglect their children."

"And what about children who neglect their parents?"

"It's not the same thing. The child can in no case be considered an investment. One day you will set up home and start your own family. You will have your own children and you will have to take care of them and not your parents."

Lassinan had not been able to respond. Much later, he had understood that in any society, at a certain stage of development, the child becomes a necessary asset, a guarantee for the old days of parents who never manage to save the slightest amount of money. Lassinan understood that especially in his social stratum, the child remained an investment for a long time to come. The survival of old parents demanded that. And Lassinan accepted it. But he had just finished tenth grade in the lycée and, a studious boy, he had begun tasting the delights of intellectual work. He was only two years away from the *baccalauréat.*

Lassinan waited for the farming civil servants hour after hour. To kill time and also to make himself useful, he took some cut rattan, carefully scooped out, and he started to make a basket that would surely be used during the coffee harvest. Late in the afternoon, the young man finished weaving the basket. The civil servants had not come. They were no longer going to come. And that evening, when old Mamadou returned home from the field, he learned with indifference that the civil servants had missed their

appointment. That didn't even outrage him. What's the use? Everyone knows that a civil servant, a real civil servant, always misses his appointments when he's not late. Why be surprised? Going back regularly on his word was in keeping with these suns. Why be surprised since the widespread triumph of the *blakoroya* was all around?

Tièfi explained that once in Blakorodougou, they had waited for someone like a deputy—in any case an important civil servant—for seven hours long, and were still standing. Only to applaud him on his way.

Be quiet, Tièfi, some things are better left unsaid.

Two

The former headmaster had been assigned elsewhere, but he had not spread the news before the school had closed its doors. And now, just a few days before school started, he hastily came to announce the news and packed up on the double. He left, leaving behind the ill-suppressed insults of the villagers and the debts he promised to come back to pay.

Oh, that director—one could now say it out loud—that director, for sure, was only a good for nothing! And a drunkard, always drunk like the insect *conogoli* that gets drunk all day long on *bangui* produced from the palm tree. And besides, he loved women too much—a weakness shared by many civil servants. And therefore, since the money he earned was used to pay for alcohol or girls, he owed as much money to Adebayo, the shopkeeper, as to the village women who sold him pepper, bananas, and cassava. Above all, the man was irreverent like the rump of a donkey. He had strength on his side and he was right. They were forced to respect his strength. Before, it wasn't like that.

Before, things were not done in this way. Today, the world was spinning round too quickly and one didn't have enough breath to follow its rhythm. And the more things

evolved, the stronger old Mamadou's conviction. He would repeat in an assured tone but without passion: "We are witnessing the end of the world. It's true, the world is ending." His conviction was strong because he was a pious Muslim who lent an attentive ear to the *marabouts*—those good *marabouts* of the past who understood Allah's language. One of his old friends, a venerated *marabout*, had told him: "When you see the son answering his father out loud, when you see him screaming at his mother, then don't ask yourself anymore questions; when you see three-legged lambs and tailless dogs, don't ask anyone anymore: the world will be at its end. The world will end with the *blakoros* in power. It will come. It will surely happen. It is written." But as the saying goes: when a prophet predicts the end of the world, he predicts his own end. And later, the marabout himself had died. But his words seemed to be confirmed . . .

Of course now and before, it was like the wrong and the right sides. Before it was better. Before before, it was a lot better. There was no possible error. The world was coming to its end. Did real men still exist? This ridiculous world that no longer tolerated real men could not last. Nevertheless, it was curiously well organized. Solid even.

Certainly, the useless headmaster had left. But another would come, same as the one before . . . or worse even. For the new school year, the same acrobatics would start up again with renewed vigor. Those who had kids to enroll were already displaying a feverish activity. They had started selecting their best yam tubercles, their best developed bunch of bananas, the largest fish from their catch, the biggest game from their hunt. And they were storing all that to offer it to the headmaster and enter into his good graces.

Old Mamadou explained to Lassinan that there were too many children to recruit and not enough spaces for all of them. To make sure that one's child would be enrolled, it was necessary to be in the headmaster's good graces. And each one did what he could. And this was exactly the reason why the poor man's son had fewer and fewer chances of going to school and becoming, later on, an important man.

Lassinan understood the problems, but actually, he perceived them in a rather unclear way. Since his childhood, he had devoted himself solely to his studies. He had been asked to succeed, that is to say to always be first in his class, to accumulate diplomas and to one day become an important civil servant. And he had gotten down to work, confirming all the hopes that his parents had placed on him. He kept himself busy always being the first in his class, but he dedicated little time to thinking about the concrete problems of life. It was no doubt because he had always been treated like a grown child. Yes, an exceptional child, quite different from the other boys of his age but all the same a grown boy who only had to deal with his endless reading. Nevertheless, time and again already, the young lycéen had wanted to speak in the village as a man. Some years earlier, it was he indeed who had spread the idea of a modern *ton*—the co-op. At that time he had conceived the thing down to its smallest details and it was not his fault if the thing had fallen through.

Still this morning, he wanted to take some responsibilities.

"I will go enroll Abou myself," he told his father.

"I will accompany you," the old man suggested. "Only I don't know what to give the new headmaster. He will perhaps bring in a new style. The other one, the last one, it

was alcohol and women; the new one, it will be women and something else. Oh, what a life!"

"No, I will go alone with Abou. But before, you will give this new headmaster neither baby goats nor yams."

"If the new one is like the former, your younger brother will not be enrolled. It's very simple. Because first of all, they look at the parents' face before enrolling the children. 'Well, so and so's son? No problem. No, but this is so and so? Then the child is too young or too old.' Oh, the power of the *blakoros*!"

"I will go with Abou and his birth certificate. That will do," Lassinan calmly asserted.

"I hope that before then, your older brother Soulé will be back from his in-laws'. We cannot put Abou in school without his consent. As for your mother, I talked to her about it and since you want it, she can only approve."

"I have heard that the new headmaster will be here tomorrow."

"Yes. The village chief says he met him the day before yesterday in Fagodougou. I don't even know if he's telling the truth because he says it's a woman. A headmistress! If that is true . . . no, but the *marabouts* are right. The world is upside down and approaching its end."

"Because a woman is headmistress?"

"Do you believe that a woman like that one listens to her husband's words? Do you believe she has the time to cook meals?"

"Maybe she should take on a houseboy-cook."

"A houseboy! You, if you were married, would you and your wife eat a meal cooked by a houseboy?"

"If my wife works, we won't have any other choice."

"But Lassinan, your mother works and she cooks. But Lassinan . . ."

He was choking:

"But son, eating the meal cooked by a boy, all your life! Do you realize! This kind of meal does not give strength. With such food, you will never be a real man, a strong man. First of all, a woman's lot is to cook the meal, then to take care of the children. The rest comes afterwards."

The new headmistress—she was really a woman—arrived two days after the date anticipated for her arrival. That day, Lassinan had gone to the new cocoa plantation. He had accompanied the farming civil servants who had finally come to do their work. And in the evening, when Lassinan came back to the village, the comments about the woman prodigy were unlimited.

"Allah, she is so beautiful! But a woman like that, who would dare speak to her as one speaks to a woman?"

"Times are changing too quickly and are changing men at the same time. But, a woman is a woman."

"Oh, those civil servants are truly lucky! Money, beautiful women: my son must become an important civil servant to avenge me."

"And her husband, has he come too?"

"Who said she has a husband?"

"In any case, she came alone. What if she doesn't have a husband? The other schoolmasters . . ."

Lassinan had the chance to see the headmistress closer. Indeed, she arranged a meeting the very following evening at the school. It was the first meeting with the notables, but she wanted the presence of some well-read young people of the village. That had an unpleasant effect on the village chief because he knew Lassinan would no doubt come to that meeting. And he had noticed since the business with the co-op that Lassinan was becoming rather dangerous for certain interests.

Lassinan came to the meeting. First, he listened. The headmistress—she was truly beautiful—claimed that she was there to try to do some good work among "her relatives and younger brothers" and that she was anxious to hear about the present situation. She would have had Lassinan's approval right away if she had not had the unpleasant habit of rolling the *r*'s in order to speak like a white woman.

In the name of the notables, the chief got up and spoke. According to him, the situation was excellent. The villagers liked the school and loved their children. And they had always appreciated the masters' excellent, unselfish work. Everything was for the best in the best of worlds. And the chief sat down again, happy. Then, since no notable wanted to speak, Lassinan got up and said the chief seemed to have spoken for himself alone, because the problems were endless. First of all, the peasants were poor. And the first days of school were always expensive. Buying new khaki suits, bags, and books for the children before the coffee crop was very difficult for a lot of families. Therefore, they had to wait, one or two months, before sending the children back home. And then, Lassinan alluded to a curious, growing custom, the one that consists in giving a lot of

gifts to the state civil servants in order to get what one wants. Some old men coughed; a cough of approval or disapproval depending on whether they were poor, or rich . . .

Finally, the headmistress said she had taken note of everything and the meeting ended. It was totally dark.

Lassinan and old Mamadou returned to their concession. After the meal, they rolled out the mats around the fire and they sat down to talk as usual. In the past, when Lassinan was little, those evening gatherings were eagerly awaited moments. It was then when one used to tell tales, taking the audience out of reality to transport it into the kingdom of animals where the powerful lion, the panther, the silly hyena or the hare, the most intelligent animal, reigned. Also in those days, one would create with a dazzling intensity the marvelous kingdoms of handsome, courageous princes, beautiful princesses the likes of whom Lassinan had not yet succeeded in meeting. There also, one would consider the problems of the village from all angles, although it did not really seem that way. Now, no one any longer told tales. The old people had too many worries and everyone knows worries drive away tales because they trouble the mind. And then the children of these new suns no longer appreciated tales as they had in the past. It's also true that these children, from their first cries, believe they know more about the world than their parents. Without initiation, they already think they know everything. And the *blakoros* also had the floor. So what's the use of tales? When an old man happens to tell a story to teach a lesson, the children of independence begin by asking for the date and the places of the story, photos: well, some proof!

No, around the fire nowadays, one could only talk about current events and then curse the power of the *blakoros*.

"Again you made enemies at the meeting this evening," old Mamadou said.

"Yes I know," Lassinan calmly answered.

"That could cost us a lot. The rich are powerful and understand each other."

"Yes. But if we must wait until we are strong to call things by their real name, we will die before. In poverty for sure."

"Lassinan is right," Tièfi stressed. "Oh! If you were not afraid of your rights . . ."

"In any case, I will go have Abou enrolled. And without a gift."

"If you manage to have him enrolled like that, it will be a real feat. Because I know that, as we are speaking, many people supposedly went to greet the new headmistress. With a pile of gifts, obviously. That would be very nice if it was without an ulterior motive. But each one of these visitors, before leaving the young woman, will have subtly made it clear to her that he has a child to put in school. We must do that too."

"No. I will manage."

After a pause, the conversation resumed but still with the same problems about the new school year and Tièfi was speaking about the private schools. Oh, the private schools, "it was shit there"! One learned nothing there, absolutely nothing at all! Besides, the teachers in these establishments spent most of their time in the skirts of their female students who could find no better way to get good grades than to sleep with their teachers. As for Tièfi, he would never dream of sending a child to these private schools. Particularly for the girls, these establishments were a waste of time and money. And besides, they did not issue any diploma to the girls but a baby, a small bastard what's more!

"When I think that at first, students were fed, clothed and housed in the schools, I can't believe we must now pay an entrance fee. This is beyond me," old Mamadou confessed.

"At the rate things are going, all schools will charge a fee. In Blakorodougou, there are primary schools that are not for free. And here in the village, this way of corrupting the headmaster, what does that mean?"

At the yard entrance, a voice called out the traditional *assalam alékoum.*

"*Alékoum salam*," old Mamadou answered.

It was Salia, Mamadou's old friend. The two men often liked to chat together. If they did not reminisce about the good old days, they were just cursing these days when one does not show any respect for age and wisdom.

"I come from the headmistress's home," Salia said. "I sent her a rooster. I'm not even sure that will be enough to ensure a place for my son. I thought you too would send Abou to school this year . . ."

"Yes, I plan on sending him this year."

"So what are you saving for the headmistress?"

"Lassinan is taking it upon himself to have his younger brother enrolled without giving the smallest gift to the schoolmasters."

"Oh really?"

"Yes."

"We can trust Lassinan. This boy has his head on his shoulders. But the rich are powerful and they understand each other."

"Therefore, the poor need to understand each other better."

He wanted to talk about the co-op that had failed as much because of the rich man's plots as because of the poor man's failure to take responsibility. But he preferred to keep quiet.

"What did you think of the woman?" Mamadou asked.

"Which woman?"

"The headmistress."

"Actually, she seems kind. In any case, she is respectful. But one never knows, that could be a façade at this point."

Then the two old men talked about the coffee trade that was supposed to begin in two months; they also mentioned *Ramadan* that was inevitably approaching. All the problems occurred at the same time and always at the most critical moment of the year.

On his mat, Lassinan kept quiet. He did not even listen anymore. He reflected on what old Salia had said. He knew they trusted him. Yes, he had to make sure, at all costs, that his little brother would be enrolled. He could no longer fail. He knew that if he failed, he would come out belittled.

Such was Lassinan's life: a legend that was weighing more and more heavily on him. Since childhood, he had stuck stubbornly to the legend of the studious and hard-working boy. And he had always fulfilled his promises. At one time, he had understood that he needed to free the child that was in him, to play without thinking, to make mistakes also. But he could no longer take it. He was a prisoner of his legend. His behavior compelled respect, but he was also forced to be a man ahead of his age. Above all, he was the boy whom one would watch to see if he would make mistakes or fail, and that is the reason why he continued to keep the legend intact.

He was going to have his little brother enrolled. He was going to even do better. His stubbornness had become a kind of wager. Everyone was impatiently waiting for the outcome.

Three

That night, old Mamadou was restless. Even more, he was worried. Of course! He planned to go to Fagodougou the next day because of Issa. He had to try to find him a place at the regional school and then a tutor also. All that was worrying him. He knew it would be difficult to find a place at the city public school. He also knew it would not be easy to find a good tutor for Issa. The city was no longer the village where, by entrusting his son to you, a man would honor you with his trust. City men had forgotten the meaning of hospitality that their ancestors had. They did not have the time to take care of others. Mamadou's only hope in Fagodougou was Bakary, the master tailor. Bakary had perhaps not forgotten the manners of his ancestors, but he was too poor and he could refuse to take in Issa.

That night, while thinking about his trip for the following day, old Mamadou slept very badly or, to be honest—Allah says that the truth alone is good—the old man could not sleep a wink all night.

It was always the same on the eve of the new school year. Problems were piling up: lots of things to do and without a cent. And yet, only money could help solve problems. But where was he to find money? No, it's not that he wanted to "fill his pockets." He wanted a little money, only enough to be able to take care of his family. Oh, each year, to be able to nourish his family properly, dress it decently, send the children to school without having to tell about his misery to the wealthy! But where could he find the money, just enough to avoid certain humiliations? Where could he find

the money? When he was young, he thought working was enough. He had worked the land because he loved the land. Who had exerted oneself more than he? His dream had been grand and honest: a *dékissè* dream—a strong-blooded dream. He had ruined his health staying in the field from morning until night in order to create a large plantation: work that honors all men. His wife, Fatouma, had courageously followed him. But the birth of their first child, instead of encouraging them to work even harder, had disappointed them. The child, who was called Soulé, was lazy like an anteater and at the age of twelve, Mamadou knew he was not good for working the land. They sent him to learn how to use a sewing machine. He didn't shine at that either. And since his departure, he had been unable to purchase his own sewing machine. Mamadou meant to buy him one after each coffee crop, but every time, more urgent problems would arise. And his money only ended up in *ninguin ninguin*—stories not at all clear, mandatory tips to civil servants.

He had not slept, the old man. He had thought about all these problems and had not even had enough strength to examine his greatest obsession. Having given up his former dream of making a fortune, now he simply wanted to take care of his family. But another important project was challenging: going to the Holy City. The world was racing to its end and it was necessary to ensure better tomorrows for oneself. Going to *Makan*—Mecca. That was his obsession. But that is a project of which one never speaks except when going to carry it out.

Very early in the morning, Mamadou got up, washed himself, but did not go to the mosque. He said the prayer in his home. After the *fatiha*, he mumbled things in Arabic that he didn't understand. Then, he finished the grievances in Dyula. "*Allah yi en*

dè mbè!—Allah help us, Allah make the day good for us, Allah give us a long life, Allah give us tomorrow, Allah accept our prayers!—*Amina*."

Allah help us under the power of the *blakoros*! More than ever, we need his help to survive. And just think, we had been promised tranquility—the *gnansouman*! Of course, the *gnansouman* existed under these suns, but for others, for the *blakoros*.

Allah yi en dè mbè!

Mamadou wanted to get on the old bus. But it was full. No more seats and a lot of luggage between the seats! The old man scrutinized the passengers, imploring a child who might get up to make room for him. There were some young people, but not a single one made a gesture. Only a woman, an old woman, made room for him, a tiny space. But Mamadou's full *boubou* restricted him and had latched on to an old bowl full of fresh fish. Mamadou fought to free himself and reach his seat. It was just at that moment that the novice *blakoro* yelled out a ringing "that's it" and the bus bounced. Mamadou, unable to help himself, dove his nose into the bowl of fresh fish while cries and laughs were also bursting out from everywhere. The driver braked and the old man got back up while some people were laughing from the ridiculous dive and others were hurling rude language at the driver. But the frail apprentice replied that only those old men and their full *boubous* were looking for trouble. They could not go anywhere unnoticed. When they took it upon themselves to travel, there were always problems on the bus.

"*Allah ka nan en malo*," old Mamadou softly whispered. "May Allah not hold us in contempt; Allah protect us from shame! *Amina*."

He reached the small space, sat down without looking at his entourage, without uttering a single word. He only had one look of gratitude for the old woman who had

made room for him. His *boubou* was probably torn, but he didn't even examine it. He smelled of fresh fish and he didn't even care about it.

The whole trip, he thought it was little to say that the world was changing. The world was upside down. When he was young, what young man would have allowed himself to be seated when an old man was standing? Who would have dared to laugh at an old man in a situation similar to the one in which he had found himself a while ago? It was not for nothing that young people, nowadays, didn't succeed at anything honest. Because they had forgotten that respect for age can offer a greater strength. The sight of Fagodougou ended the old man's sad thoughts. The vehicle stopped at the station. Everyone got off.

Mamadou also got off. He took the street that led to the school. Fagodougou stretched in front, behind, to the left, to the right . . .

Ahead was the school. An old school built by the Whites shortly after they had settled in the area. Its roofs of gray tile and its massive pillars revealed the colonial style. Nearby was the hospital. It had to be just as old as the school. These two places, one right next to the other, expressions of a civilization that had proclaimed loudly its superiority, were no longer seen as the thing of others. They were integrated. But now, ruling in there were the all-powerful *blakoros* who made the heart to those who needed them beat.

Behind, there had been the former offices of the administration, offices that had witnessed otherwise violent judgements, like the language of the horsewhip: bad memories! At the same spot was now standing the imposing court house where judgements took another form: oh, the hypocrisy of the *blakoros*! Further, on that same

side, an old bridge stretched across the river and led to a part of the city hidden behind a small wooded area: the new quarter for the nouveau riche.

To the left, what had been the European quarter under colonization. There only, two-storied homes stood. This quarter had remained the "Business District," the most active Center of the city. The big market and its enormous rusty roof, the only cinema, and the only dance hall were located there. And on the ground floor of the two-storied homes, Syrian and Lebanese shopkeepers had replaced the European colony.

To the right, the working-class quarter, *Dioulabougou*, the Dyula quarter, as it was called—as if it only housed Dyulas—was only alive at night. It cleared out during the day because its inhabitants worked in the "Business District" or elsewhere. But at night, however, there was the heart of the city. The small shopkeepers would set up their stalls and turn on the storm lamp, the *abokis* would sell hot coffee and buttered bread or grilled meat. In the good old days, Dioulabougou, at night, made you want to live in the city. Memories!

Mamadou did not like Fagodougou because, curiously, he recognized himself in it. Which old man wouldn't recognize himself in this dying city! Before, it was a city whose name had certainly spread far and wide. Maybe it could not compare to Grand-Bassam, Dakar, Bobo-Dioulasso or Bamako, but it was alive and its name was known in those cities. But Independence seemed to have been fatal to it. Because, while the young cities were growing with arrogant children, Fagodougou was dying, desperately trying to regain some strength. Instead of expanding, the city was shriveling up day by day. Fagodougou was being eaten away by those lingering diseases about which *marabouts* themselves could do nothing. But a city under these suns had no right to die. Besides, if

Fagodougou was dying from its incurable disease, wasn't it because of its inhabitants? But all city dwellers are the same. Fagodougou was simply unlucky.

It was very hot and Mamadou was walking towards the school. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and he smelled of fresh fish.

May Allah cleanse us from such humiliation! *Amina.*

There was scarcely anyone at the school. It was not the recruitment day in town. Mamadou asked for the headmaster. Someone showed him the man's home. He walked towards it, but as he was getting closer, his step became less certain. Allah, he was afraid of the sons of the country! It was painful to see. The others had beaten him with the tree stump, had made him work like a slave on the roads of forced labor. But in those days, he would sometimes dare to utter a little *no*. And this *no*, even if uncertain, gave him back all his dignity. The general *no* had eventually freed the country. But to take it right back to what? Things had simply changed names and torture was only disguised, but how much more refined!

Mamadou was afraid to meet the headmaster, a man who could certainly be his son.

Allah yi en dè mbè!

May Allah help us; may Allah also help our sons to understand! *Allah yi ou dè mbè! Amina.*

"*Assalam alékoum.*"

Mamadou did not hear any response. Nevertheless, people were talking a lot inside. He distinctly heard the voice of a woman who spieled off French like he, Mamadou, spoke Dyula. He also perceived the weak echo of a man's voice.

Mamadou took a risk. He entered as silent as an eel. The couple did not seem to have noticed the presence of the intruder and the old man witnessed a scene that left him dumbfounded. The woman, standing, one hand on her hip and the other with a stretched index finger heading dangerously towards the man's eye, the woman was shouting, gesticulating as if someone had drenched her with burning coals. The man, rather shabby, sunk in his armchair, his head low, was babbling confused answers, hardly loud enough to be heard. The couple was definitely arguing. "These things happen to everyone," old Mamadou admitted. But this couple's behavior made him uncomfortable. That woman who was speaking, dominating that man . . . that man could not be the headmaster. Such a man could not have the strength to run a school. At that moment, the man noticed him.

"Hey you, what the hell are you up to?"

Like a jack-in-the-box, the man jumped from his armchair.

"So, you no longer knock at the door, you old imbecile?"

He was speaking in French and Mamadou could not understand anything. But the man was now threatening. He seemed to have gotten back all his virility and the old man, fearing for his old body, began to apologize.

"*I hèkè to*—pardon me my son. I said hello and no one answered, and I heard people talking. I came in. Pardon me, in the name of Allah."

"What do you want?"

"My son . . ."

"There is no room in my school; and besides, if your son is as rude as you, he'd better stay in your concession. Anyway, I don't have the time now . . ."

Mamadou understood that he was simply kicking him out. He turned around and retreated. As he was about to leave, the woman shouted at him in Dyula:

"*I nan oulafè*—come back this evening."

"No doubt," Mamadou said to himself. This is a Dyula woman. A Muslim, certainly. And she dared to speak to her husband in such a tone! *Allaho akbar*! Allah is great and powerful. And his will is good. Mamadou would come back that evening and perhaps, thanks to that woman, his business might be settled. Yes, he would beg this woman to take his son and then, a little money would definitely calm down the husband's arrogant behavior. Oh, having to drop to the feet of this couple of degenerates! *Marabouts* had predicted it: the power of the *blakoros* would be tied to the power of the woman. The signs were clearly visible. The world was coming to an end.

Oh, the power of the *blakoros*!

The *others* made you wish you did not have black skin. They made you simply feel disgusted with life. But Allah said to accept life and all its difficulties. Allah knows what he is doing. No doubt sooner or later, things would change. For Mamadou as well. He was almost convinced of it. A better day would come for all the poor and the frustrated. In this world or in the next.

Allah answer our prayers! *Amina.*

Before entering Bakary's concession, he gave the ritual greeting.

"*Assalam alékoum*!"

"*Alékoum salam*," came the answer.

Bakary and his children were eating. Mamadou washed his hands and sat down also on the sheep skin. The rice dish with peanut sauce was steaming and smelled good.

Mamadou ate heartily. The meal was eaten in silence. Which mouth do we eat with and which one do we speak with? They were eating in silence and unwittingly, Mamadou began to think about his friend, Bakary, and what his life had been like.

To be honest, Bakary and Fagodougou had led similar lives. At a very young age, Bakary had refused to work the land and his father had sent him to Fagodougou. There he began his apprenticeship with a great master tailor. Everyone said it at the time: Bakary's apprenticeship was painful. A semi-slavery, let's call things as they are. Spiteful gossipers had reported to his father that he was simply the houseboy at his boss's home. But those days were still the ones of the *dékissès*—real children who were kind-hearted and who exceeded the *blakoroya* although the initiation had already died or degenerated. Therefore, in only a half-dozen years, Bakary knew how to sew better than his boss and soon competed with the great masters of Dakar, Abidjan, and Bobo. It was just at the time when Fagodougou was at its peak, the time when great Muslims still had money and were not satisfied with large, blue or white richly embroidered *boubous*. Everyone knew that in Fagodougou—and even as far as Blakorodougou—Bakary was the best when it came to sewing *boubous*. The mark of his machine had something particular, inexplicable. There was a sudden flourish of fame; money came by itself.

So, what did Bakary do with his money? It would have been impolite to ask him. In any case, they knew one thing. The great tailor was almost suffocated by his numerous friends, his relatives who came out from the woodwork. Each one wished him well. And to prove it to him, they would offer him their daughter to marry. What mark of friendship or kinship goes beyond that? And Bakary, stunned, no longer knew how

many women he had married. But each one knows that the women who are offered in this manner cost quite a lot.

But *naforo*—money—is nothing. And Bakary never knew when his fortune began to escape him. In any case, that coincided with the arrival of independence. They had promised that everything would change. Bakary's fortune changed. He lost his customers because the Dyula shopkeepers—their business having collapsed—began dealing in something other than richly embroidered *boubous*. As to the civil servants, who had become the most important men, they were wearing pants and a jacket. Bakary had learned to sew something else.

Naforo is nothing. Money disappeared as quickly as it had come in. Bakary's friends—and his relatives too—disappeared. His wives followed. Only one stayed with him. She was too old to be able to take advantage of the civil servants. Bakary sold one of his three sewing machines. Then a second one was sold. The third one, the only one left, was old and used only to mend the rags of old people, like Mamadou, who remained loyal to the old tailor. Thus Bakary was trying to survive. But Bakary was dwindling like Fagodougou.

Naforo—wealth—is nothing. Whoever has not understood this yet has understood nothing.

The meal was finished. They had washed their hands and the children had swept the ground. While the two friends were chewing the kola nut, Bakary asked about the news.

"*Dô di*, Mamadou?"

"*A ma kè djougou manyé*—it's nothing serious."

A simple way of saying! But Mamadou resumed:

"You know, the children's return to school, with its string of problems . . . At the village, in Kongodjan, our school has only three grades. But this year, Issa is going into fourth grade. He is forced to come here to Fagodougou. So, I wanted to see the headmaster to have him enrolled."

"Is it done?"

"My goodness, so far my day has not been very good. At any rate, I went to the headmaster's home. But I don't know if I saw him."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"To be honest, I saw a woman who was telling off a man. So I could not believe that that man . . ."

"But it is him, the headmaster!" Bakary exclaimed.

"By the power of Allah," Mamdou mumbled.

"Yes, it is him. His wife spends her time telling him off when she's not in bed with another boy. Really, one will see everything nowadays!"

"But with all his brains, all the knowledge he has in his head! How can he command respect from the other schoolmasters or the children?"

"Before, he was not like this. Before his marriage, he was nice. But he got married and it's as if he had married a big pain. He even began drinking. How did he welcome you?"

"He shouted a lot of things in French. As God is my witness, he was not a happy man. As I was leaving, his wife told me to come back in the evening. She spoke in Dyula."

"Oh! I forgot to tell you that she is a Dyula woman. But she loves men and money too much. Or maybe she just loves money. Give her a little money and you will see. She will force her husband to take Issa."

May Allah protect us under the power of the *blakoros* and the courtesans! *Amina*.

"I would also like to ask you for a big favor, Bakary."

"May Allah help me to be able to give it to you!"

"I told you that Issa will have to come here to Fagodougou if they agree to take him at school. I would like to ask you to take him in your home."

There was a hush. Bakary was thinking.

"You know," Bakary finally said, "that I cannot refuse to help you. I have known you for too long and our friendship is built on too many complicities. But today's children are not children. It would be an honor for me to look after your child. He is our child, to us all, but this child could spoil our friendship."

"May Allah keep us from that!"

"Look, my wife is old. She will no doubt ask your son and her sons for small chores. She will ask them to go draw water. And they really might go tell you something other than the truth. That would spoil our friendship."

"You spoke the truth and God likes the truth. But don't worry about that. I know today's children. And we would have to be an imbecile to have faith in their word. That will not spoil our friendship."

"Indeed, I wanted everything to be clear between us. Otherwise, your child is my child. Who knows, maybe he is the one who will bury me some day? You can send him to me."

"Thank you, my brother, thank you. Allah will thank you for me."

"One last thing. As you can see, I am poor; this is obvious to the naked eye. In our days, the poor man is called wicked. My food is very simple. The child should not be complicated. He will eat what we eat."

"He will eat what you eat. In my home, he eats nothing special; quite the opposite."

"Then, it's settled."

"Thank you, my brother, thank you, God."

The *mogoya* was still there—a great respect for human relationships. But the *mogoya* was only in the heart of the old people, of certain old people. There was no hope because it was dying with them. Among the youth, the new human relationships were of a different category. Money was controlling them.

May Allah open the eyes of our sons and daughters before it's too late! *Amina.*

In the afternoon, as soon as two o'clock had rung, Mamadou set off again for the school. The sun seemed even more oppressive, but the old man was walking more assuredly. To have his son enrolled, he counted neither on his word nor on the pity that one would have for him. Nowadays, the civil servants understood only one language—money. Mamadou patted his pocket. It was heavy. The wallet was there. Five thousand francs, that was money. And to think he had always had that amount in his pocket and that quite often, he had suffered from lack of money. Some days, he and his family had eaten the sauce without fish or meat. And today, he was going to give these five thousand francs to a drunkard and his wife, a prostitute."

"*Assalam alékoum,*" he called out at the door.

"Come in," someone shouted.

It was the woman, alone. Thank you Allah.

"I have come to arrange things for my son."

"Yes, what is the matter with him?" she said in a superior tone as if men, *blakoros* even, were not passing over her.

"In my village, the school only has three grades and my son is going into the fourth grade."

"Is he really going up to the next grade?"

"Yes, I have the papers."

Mamadou took them out of his fat pocket and gave them to the lady. She glanced at them, pouting. Finally, she said:

"He has not done well."

What! Over there, the schoolmaster had said to Mamadou that Issa was among the best. At the passage exam, he had been ranked third out of forty students. So what? Mamadou understood. It was time to make his money talk. He slipped his hand back into his pocket, and took out the old wallet. He took out the five thousand francs bill. The woman saw it, but did not show any excessive enthusiasm. She continued to stare at the child's attendance certificate. She said:

"We could certainly do something for him. I think he can do well."

Mamadou held out the bill.

"For your kola nut," he whispered.

And he immediately regretted it. A lady does not chew the kola nut. He had spoken without thinking. Fortunately, the lady apparently had not paid attention. She

calmly took the bill, tucked it away in her bra on her pretty slut breasts. At the same time, her husband entered the room. She quickly told him something in French. The man didn't say anything. So, she addressed Mamadou in Dyula.

"You can leave in peace. Your son will be enrolled."

Mamadou said thank you and left. He went to Bakary's to tell him about the visit and asked him for the way to Kongodjan. The journey back home was no problem. At home, he was told that Lassinan had easily enrolled Abou. Besides, rumor had it that the young headmistress was enrolling children only upon Lassinan's advice. Some people had sorely missed their chickens and other gifts given to the young headmistress.

Old Mamadou also described his trip which, despite some incidents, had ended in success. When he began to speak about the episode of the five thousand francs, Lassinan got up and went to bed. But the old man continued to speak. Perhaps he needed to explain his gesture and even excuse the schoolmasters. In any case, he said some intriguing things. For example, if schoolmasters take part in milking the people, it's out of sheer need and to be honest, school headmasters are not worse than any other civil servants. They are far less dangerous to the people than the other exploiters. And besides, they are important only at the beginning of the new school year. Afterwards, they are forgotten. Whereas some others reign all year. "Really," old Mamadou said, "we come across worse under the power of the *blakoros*." No doubt, he was right.

Four

Old Mamadou certainly would have liked to pay a visit to Mori Ba.

This is no way to toss children out into the world without making sure what obstacles lie ahead, without making some sacrifices that are always beneficial.

He had to see Mori Ba. And Mamadou failed to understand Lassinan's reluctance to go to the master's home. Because after all—there was not a single doubt there—Mori Ba was truly the best *marabout* in Kongodjan and even within a hundred miles around.

To be honest, nobody knew very much about Mori Ba. He had arrived one stormy evening, drenched and flanked by a scrawny disciple looking like a *Peul*, carrying a small package and the inevitable kettle for the ablutions. That wet entrance into the village was very discreet and the "advertising" side of it failed. Therefore, at the start, people had mistrusted him, of course. Particularly because he was poorly dressed. But very early on, Mori Ba made them understand their error. Only educated men, the ones who know and see, only those dress poorly. Such men are too close to Allah to think about their body, that detestable physical appearance. They understood the lesson very quickly and hurried over to the master to request his services.

Another thing proved that Mori Ba was not like all the other *marabouts*, those dangerous sly-looking charlatans who could talk up a storm. He never asked for cash. He had only one rate. For any job, he would insist on one sheep—of any color, provided it were fat—and a rooster. The sickly disciple would take care of reselling the master's sheep in the same village. According to spiteful gossip folk who do not even respect Allah's servants, he could easily resell the same sheep three times. As for the roosters, they got thrown into the cooking pot in a flash.

There was something else about Mori Ba. He gave neither a ring, nor an amulet, nor *nansi dji*—a magic potion—to those who requested his services. No, all that was the work of *karamoko dé*—those beginners, *marabout* apprentices. The master would pray to Allah only, or to say things clearly and precisely, he would converse with Allah. By

confiding some worries to Mori Ba, you could be certain the complaint would reach the Highest One himself.

No one had asked his neighbor if his affair entrusted to Mori Ba, therefore Allah, had found a satisfactory solution. But who would deny that Allah is free to help whomever he wants? Mori Ba asserted that he was doing his job. He would not rest at night due to his endless praying. And it was Allah's fault if someone was not happy. Mori Ba was beyond reproach. Besides, who would think like that? The man was *waldjou*, that is to say, much more than just an ordinary man and a little less than an angel: a saint.

Indeed, Mamadou did not understand why Lassinan could not stand the sight of the saintly man. Mamadou had urged his son. The young man had ended up refusing once and for all and had even blurted out something abominable: "Don't you see either, like them all, this wretch, Mori Ba, is just an outright scoundrel? If I could, I would have him put in jail." Lassinan had dared to say such a thing at the risk of unleashing God's fit of rage against his family. Oh, children nowadays!

In fact, Lassinan was beginning to deeply worry his father. Everything was fine as long as he was quiet. His very silence was certainly troubling enough. But his rare words caused absolute anguish. He was not at all the typical boy irreverent and proud of his knowledge. He was just elusive. Perhaps because his words, without being conspicuously impertinent, always touched upon a subject untouchable in the eyes of the old villagers. He knew the trouble he was creating around himself. Nevertheless, what he wanted above all was to erase certain myths, old or modern, that clever scoundrels kept alive to exploit the villagers under these suns. He knew how strong economic power

was. And so, he had spoken about the co-op. Many poor villagers received that idea as the word of God. But the rich tried to choke the chick in the egg. Once the egg was broken, the chick came out anyway. It did not have time to grow up. It was choked dead. Lassinan was not there. He was studying in Blakorodougou. Nevertheless, he felt the failure as his own. He considered it, however, a step or an experience. He was young and the future was his. He had hope. The headmistress's arrival seemed to increase that hope. He met with the young woman several times. And before his departure for Blakorodougou, he told his father to go and see her every time he had problems with the civil servants or when he had a letter to write.

Have his letter written by the headmistress! For sure, Mamadou would not dare. One must try to avoid humiliation whenever possible. Yes, they were beginning to grasp clearly the recruitment rules in the village that year. They had quickly understood that the headmistress had not played the game. And some people were furious. The headmistress had accepted the gifts but had not seemed to notice those who had made them. She had recruited by considering only the kids' ability to begin their schooling. Thus, Salia's youngest son had been rejected despite the big rooster. The child was too little and too frail. He would have to wait until the following year.

The young headmistress had altered the game. That pleased the poor and offended the rich. God has not put men on an equal footing; why then was a young teacher making it her business to do so? The village chief, who had not swallowed the scandal, spread the rumor that Lassinan was behind the young woman's behavior. And let's be honest, Lassinan was not a master. He certainly could have been one, but he was not. Why the devil get involved in these things?

The young headmistress seemed to have chosen the poor, but tell me, Muslim souls, was that reason enough for Mamadou to have his letters written at her home? Let the poor man disown his defender and kiss up to the powerful, that is where some chance for salvation lies. Lassinan's bold move was likely to cause problems for the family. The rich get along. Especially under the power of the *blakoros* and of the girls of easy virtue.

Mamadou had become helpless confronted with Lassinan's behavior which he judged quite imprudent. It is difficult to tell the truth nowadays, it is difficult to behave well nowadays, not that speaking the truth has vanished away in the haze of this chaotic world, not that good has become indiscernible in this world of evil, but because truth and good acts bring so many problems . . . Used to blows, old Mamadou was waiting for reprisals. He knew they were bound to happen. Only, he tried to figure out where they would come from. And going to *El Hadj* Doulaye's home for the third time, he wondered if the blow would not come from there.

In any case!

He was on his way to Doulaye's home for the third time. The first time, just two days ago, he had not been allowed to enter the man's living room. As soon as he had entered the yard, they had looked at him suspiciously while making him understand that they knew what he wanted. They had simply told him that Doulaye had been traveling. But Mamadou could have sworn that he had heard *Hadj*'s loud voice.

Mamadou had said thank you and left.

Again this morning, he had come to Doulaye's home. The first child who had seen him had explained to him that his *baba* had returned but was tired. Doulaye's wives

had looked at Mamadou with an ironic and malicious eye. They seemed to tell him that it was not proper to disturb good-hearted people so early in the morning. Planted in the middle of the enormous yard, Mamadou had babbled some excuses. And he had explained that he would come back. That was simply to say something.

So that afternoon—it was a little after two o'clock—Mamadou was on his way back to see *El Hadj* Doulaye for the third time. Of course he could complain about the sun that was beating down on him; he could also complain about his worn-out sandals, but the thought of complaining about Doulaye or his wives had never crossed his mind. Thinking about the way he was welcomed, and how those well-dressed and perfumed women watched him, he could only complain to Allah. He is the one who has weaved each man's destiny. A Muslim family, Muslim women who welcomed guests like that! They had not even offered him a seat where he could sit down, nor had they asked him if there was anything new as is customary. Besides, they knew why he had come and it was precisely for that reason that they were giving him this kind of welcome.

Who said that *naforo* is nothing!

Nevertheless, he had not come to beg for charity. At the very most a favor, if one may say so. Every year, on the day before the children's return to school, Mamadou would come to see Doulaye. Because Doulaye was a rich man. Mamadou would come to request a little money for the children. Of course, he reimbursed that money after the coffee crop. For both of them, it was convenient. For Doulaye, it was more worthwhile. This way, Mamadou could afford to send his children away. As for Doulaye, after the crop, he received more than he had given. Because for three thousand francs given, he would receive a *péré*—a load of thirty kilograms of coffee. But one knows the price of a

péré is around three thousand five hundred francs. Therefore, Doulaye was doing Mamadou a service, but Mamadou and all those who were in his situation were making Doulaye richer every year.

No, Mamadou had not come to beg for charity. If anything, for a simple service that would be a lot more convenient for Doulaye than for Mamadou.

The third time, Doulaye's youngest wife—she had to be about fifteen years old, but that was no one's business—said shyly that Doulaye was sleeping and that he should not be disturbed. Sleeping at such an hour! It was time for the first afternoon prayer. Had Doulaye already finished praying and was he already sleeping? Mamadou was not quite sure. Leave again and come back? Indeed, he was not a child, nor an imbecile. Poverty favors acceptance, forces acceptance of humiliation, but that does not mean it stops someone's awareness of humiliation, nor that it makes someone an idiot. Mamadou was looking at the young woman:

"I must see him, my child. This is the third time that I have come."

He remained silent. The young girl was also looking at him. She no doubt wanted to tell him something, but she seemed to be afraid. Afraid of her co-wives, of her husband?

"I must see him, my child."

She lowered her head and silently whispered:

"Come in, uncle, he is here."

"Thank you my child, thank you for having allowed me to step inside your home. May Allah grant you many children."

Mamadou came in. The coolness of that home, the magnificence of the furniture and of the oriental rugs on the floor, the light smell of fine incense from *Makan*, so they said, that was floating continually: all that was making Mamadou uncomfortable. Could one think about Allah in such a home? Did they have the time to think about other people, about poor people in such a home? Mamadou stopped thinking. His gaze had fallen on the village chief seated opposite *El Hadj* Doulaye. Mamadou lost his self-confidence again. Nevertheless, he greeted; someone answered him. Just like a *blakoro* type of civil servant would say "how's it going?" in passing. Someone showed him a seat. He sat down and felt useless. Clumsily, he tried to make himself at home. He dropped a censer. The chief smiled, but Mamadou did not see him because he had bent down and was busy putting the censer back in place.

"I have been told you already stopped by two times, Mamadou?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am listening to you."

He was listening to him. And yet, he knew very well why he, Mamadou, had come. He also knew it would be humiliating for him to ask for money in front of a third party. *El Hadj* Doulaye was probably happy to make fun of his embarrassment.

"So I am listening," Doulaye repeated mercilessly.

Mamadou uttered it all in one breath.

"Well, I need money. The crop is still a long way off and if you could lend me some money in the meantime, that would help me a lot. In the name of the All Powerful, six thousand francs would do me good."

"It's not convenient because these days, I too have some small problems. Two of my seven trucks that take merchandise to Mali are broken down. A week ago, I bought a plot of land for two million in Blakorodougou. I plan to begin the construction work soon. And then, my younger brother is getting married in Fagodougou next week. Really, I have problems."

"Even three thousand francs would not be sufficient, but *alihamdoulilahi*, that could do a lot of things. The children need it to leave. And they have to leave, if not, what will they do?"

"I am sorry for this year," concluded *El Hadj* Doulaye. "*Allah yi hèrè kè en yé*—May God shower us with his blessings!"

That was a polite way of dismissing him. Mamadou got up.

"*Allah yi en dè mbè*!"

The chief asked him if Lassinan had already left. Mamadou pretended he had not heard and left. Outside, he heard the two men bursting with laughter, as if Allah did not forbid the good Muslim to roar with laughter. He did not pay attention to the women in the yard. Thus, he did not see their mocking eyes riveted on him. He did not notice either that only Doulaye's youngest wife had her head lowered.

May Allah wash us of the humiliation!

May Allah have mercy on the degeneracy of the world under the power of the *blakoros*, of the corrupted girls and . . . if the *mogoya* has not reached the *blakoros*, it has left many old people, especially the rich. *Naforo* has gone to their heads and they are having fun torturing the poor. And where are they putting the *soulamaya*—the solidarity between the believers?

May Allah soothe the suffering of the poor! *Amina.*

Mamadou did not immediately go home. He headed straight ahead to Akafu's home.

Undoubtedly, Akafu was an example, the flagrant example of those who are doomed to Allah's hell. The old Muslims were not afraid to say it. And besides, thinking about what the *marabouts* say, they were in any case tempted to declare that indeed, the man was presenting external signs of the most terrible of anathemas.

Akafu was fat. Nothing abnormal about that. But his stomach! His potbelly was exceptionally imposing. The man could not wrap his own arms around it. There was the sign. Because what could develop the abdomen to such a degree? Of course, money, affluence, they would say. But the old Dyulas maintained that it was the *haramou.* The *haramou*, let's be clear, is at the same time the fraud, its fruit and the sin that accompanies them. The *haramou* blows up the stomach abnormally. The proof? Akafu. And naturally, no one could deny that Akafu was a crook of the worst kind. In the past, he would perhaps swindle, but he did not go too far. So, he could be put in the same category as *El Hadj* Doulaye or Habib of Fagodougou. But Akafu decided to take short cuts. To those who wanted to borrow money from him, an important amount—let's say one hundred thousand francs—Akafu would propose a deal. If the planter did not manage to pay him back the one hundred thousand francs for the next crop—and few peasants earn that amount in three crops—Akafu would quite simply take over the plantation.

In that way, Akafu had become a big planter. A rich planter. But each day, his stomach was growing a little more and Akafu was suffocating under the *haramou.*

Nevertheless, Akafu created no difficulty for Mamadou. He let the old man recount his misery while scrutinizing him with his small red eyes. Finally, he asked him:

"How much?"

"Ten thousand francs," Mamadou risked. "That will be a great help, for my children, their transportation, their uniforms and their school supplies . . ."

"Is that all?"

"That will be very good. Really, giving me this money is saving me and my family and Allah will reward you."

"Fifteen thousand francs after the crop. And I'm not asking you for a field as guarantee."

"That will be good."

The laconic Akafu opened the chest that was always within his reach and he counted ten one thousand franc bills for Mamadou.

"*Allah yi hèrè kè iyé*! May Allah shower you with his blessings," Mamadou repeated.

He was really sincere. Why should Akafu go to hell and not *El Hadj* Doulaye?

That same evening, Lassinan asked if he could leave for school. Classes started again on the following day. He would make sure to leave Issa with his tutor in Fagodougou before continuing his journey to Blakorodougou.

The entire family accompanied Lassinan and Issa to the bus station. Lassinan was sad. His father's string of blessings did not bring him peace. His mother's presence, her silent and loving support could not ease the *djoussou kassi*—her son's despair.

"Why are you crying, *koro*?" Abou asked him.

"I am not crying, Abou. Surely, that's not the solution. Perhaps one day, you and the men of your generation will find the solution."

"And never forget to say your prayers Lassinan," old Mamadou finally recommended.

"Prayer. I don't know either if the solution lies only in that direction."

The car moved off, leaving old Mamadou perplexed.

CHAPTER 5
PART TWO: THE PEOPLE THEY MILK

One

Soulé and his wife returned from their trip just one week after Lassinan's and Issa's departure. They had been unable to come back earlier because Soulé's father-in-law was sick and they had to wait until his condition improved before asking for the way.

To tell the truth, Soulé was not wild about the news of Abou's departure to school. It again meant the beginning of endless expenses. There was a chance his sewing machine might never be bought. But Soulé had a happy nature and he thought that, surely, Lassinan could soon buy him a machine. And besides, in any case, Soulé was happy to be reunited with his friend Adebayo who had also just returned from a trip. Adebayo had returned from his country.

Adebayo was a *Nago*, in other words a tradesman: a small shopkeeper. Adebayo's early days in the business were not well known, but you couldn't say they went unnoticed. People said that Adebayo had started out by going from village to village with his tray on his head, and on the tray were some combs, unhealthy ointments, thread rolls, small dirty mirrors, candy bags and pocket knives that were occasionally rusty. If you believe those who were witnesses to these early days, the secondhand goods dealer often sold at a loss. His tray was nevertheless getting wider from day to day. After some months of this business, Adebayo got a shop! The shop had the same lay out as the tray. The shelves, at first empty, slowly began to overflow with stuff, cheap junk, cans of food and sugar.

In any case, Adebayo and his shop were prospering and he could even sell his goods on credit. The informer says that during the coffee and cocoa trade, Adebayo would grow richer than the peasants. Perhaps it was true because Adebayo had managed to go to his faraway country and come back. But Adebayo had come back very angry. He explained his anger to Soulé.

Three months before the departure for his country, he had sent some money to his father. Two hundred thousand francs to be exact. First, he had sent twenty thousand francs and then he had sent another money order in the amount of one hundred eighty thousand francs. But, once at home, he had been surprised to see that the second money order, the most important one, had reached its destination while inexplicably, the first money order had arrived nowhere. Immediately upon his return, Adebayo had gone to Fagodougou's post office where the phlegmatic civil servant, after having searched through his papers, claimed to have sent the money order. But *Adebayo* was not born yesterday. He was not easily taken in. He assured the little postal worker that he had understood the scheme. He accused him of having spent the twenty thousand francs while waiting for better times to send them off. The wretched civil servant protested feebly. Adebayo knocked him out saying that he had just returned from his country and that there was no reason for the second money order to have arrived before the first. The civil servant became flustered, smiled and ended up saying that he would reimburse the money at the end of the month.

Soulé simply understood that the civil servants, at all levels, could be dangerous. But Soulé was not worried about Adebayo who would know how to defend himself

anywhere. Soulé's concern was rather the echo of his father's and of a lot of Muslim peasants as *Ramadan* approached.

With the children's return to school, certain worries had smoothed themselves out. But immediately, others would arise. The month of fasting, *Ramadan*, was the most important month of the year: thirty days of fast and the hope of being cleansed from many sins, countless stains that haunt the atmosphere under the reign of the *blakoros* and streetwalkers. Thirty days of fast also under the sun, spent weeding under the coffee trees and harvesting the coffee while getting bit by red ants. But thirty days of physical exhaustion are nothing if one has succeeded in obtaining what one needs to eat properly every evening.

In order to appropriately observe the fasting days, each family was to buy, depending on whether it was a large or small family, one bag or half a bag of rice, millet, a carton of sugar, and on some rare occasions, a little honey, a small supply of dates and some milk too. The rice and millet would be used for the porridge, and from time to time the morning meal. The sugar would be added to the porridge and coffee. The presence of honey and dates was simply symbolic. Could anyone still not know that Allah likes these kinds of foods and recommends them as much as he forbids pork and alcohol? The springs of paradise, as the *marabouts* claim, are pure and fresh water, milk, and honey flowing at the feet of superb date palm trees.

They have to buy all that, if not, how will they observe the fasting? But how will they buy all that with no money? Adebayo was the only shopkeeper who could give credit and not worry too much. But Adebayo's small shop couldn't allow him to give credit during the month of fasting. And that was really a shame. Really unfortunate

even… That was old Mamadou's opinion. Salia too and many other peasants of Kongodjan. For in Fagodougou, Habib ruled.

And Habib was something. A force.

"You're going to have to return to Fagodougou to see Habib," old Mamadou said to his friend Salia.

The images of his last trip to Fagodougou flooded his memory: the old vehicle, the bowl of fresh fish, those laughs around him. And the men of Fagodougou, insolent even in their looks, their walks.

"*I* plan on sending my son Tièbiè to Fagodougou," Salia said. "Habib knows him and he will not make a fuss. He will give the goods on credit and will note them down in my voucher book."

"Really, that is a good idea. I too will send someone."

"That will be better. We are too old to travel. There are too many misadventures."

"Yes," Mamadou simply declared.

He was thinking of sending Tièfi. But with Tièfi, you were never sure of anything. Because if old Mamadou's brother-in-law really claimed to have his head on his shoulders, very few villagers were convinced of it.

Tièfi had left the village at quite a young age. He had headed directly for the capital Blakorodougou without even understanding a word of French. It's true that at that time, Dyula was spoken just about anywhere and you did not necessarily need to understand French in order to move around in the country. Therefore, Tièfi had left for the capital. The man's adventure began there. This adventure immediately became a

legend that Tièfi would recount by adding on each time some new changes. If the whole story is that he was a houseboy-cook, the first version specified that he was in the first place a houseboy and that it was because he washed the sheets and the underpants so well that his master appointed him cook. According to the second version, he never washed underclothes and, occasionally, he told the boss's lady that at home, custom forbade a boy to wash a woman's underwear. So, they assigned him to the kitchen where he developed his exceptional kitchen boy talents. What did it matter! Indeed at one point, life began to smile at Tièfi. A prostitute clung to him outright. They spent some really pleasant nights together. Unfortunately, the lady was insatiable: fashionable dresses, luxury jewelry, large bottles of perfume, a sewing machine too and all that on a houseboy salary. Tièfi began to have some really bad nights. The lady too no doubt, for she disappeared without warning. In fact, upon returning home one evening from his job, Tièfi noticed that the beauty had made off with all that she had . . . earned.

Tièfi began to drink. This allowed him to discover the real world. He realized that his boss was taking him for a fool simply because he was obedient. Furthermore, he understood that he had played too much the role of the fool from all sides and from then on, he did not allow anyone to take advantage of him. He said out loud that he was fed up with the white bosses, the prostitutes and all the little black men who, having had the chance to go to school, liked to think they were gods. His boss dared to say to him that he was drunk. He lived to regret it! The insult earned him a knocked out tooth and a black eye. Tièfi never said a word about the immediate consequences of his actions. But he got a great deal of pride from it all. He had dared to beat down the white man at a time when white was a sacred color. He had nothing to fear anymore. Does one die

twice? He stayed a long time in Blakorodougou and nearly grew old in a tumultuous life. Tired, practically good for nothing, he came back to Kongodjan.

And Tièfi would give each one of them a piece of his mind. He was brave, but above all, he didn't have anything to lose. No wife or children. He could speak without being afraid of reprisals. One day, under the palaver tree, he accused the village chief of having embezzled funds—the co-op funds—and he gave some proof that was not from a screwball, which is how the powerful of the market saw him. But secretly, some villagers—those who, in spite of everything, still loved truth—respected Tièfi.

Finally, old Mamadou decided to send Tièfi to Habib's home in Fagodougou.

Fagodougou.

Tièfi and Tiègbiè, Salia's son, got out of the automobile. Tièfi smelled that air polluted by gas fumes and garbage, that city air so different from the village air. Fagodougou was nothing compared to the capital Blakorodougou or other capitals like Accra, Abidjan or Bamako. But Fagodougou managed anyway to put a kind of trance on Tièfi that tied him to his past. His past, that muddled life: the disreputable bars, the women with make-up on, the rare *balafon* parties—twisted scenes at the heart of a city that had already killed its traditional spirit—the brawls and the "yes boss."

"Yes," Tièfi thought. "Yes, and after that? The city is my enemy as much as I am my own enemy. I gave it all of myself: my youth, my enthusiasm. But in so far as success in life boils down to the sum of its achievements, my life has been worthless. Of course, my life has been rich in suffering, humiliations, some secret joys too. My life has been rich in passions, determination, but in the eyes of my fellow villagers, my life has only been a long joke with reality. Because I came back to the village with nothing. And

the marks, and the marks that life has left on me? Are they invisible? I should not have come back; I should have stayed over there, died over there."

"Tiègbiè?"

"Yes?"

"Let's go into this bar!"

"What for?"

"I think I'm going to have a glass of beer. Yes, I'm going to have a drink before going to Habib's."

"But how about seeing him first? That's the most important thing. We see him, we take the goods we have to put in the car, and after that you have your drink."

"A glass of beer, that hardly takes any time. But perhaps you are right. Let's go see Habib."

They walked on the sidewalk and passed in front of the bar. Tièfi heard a familiar voice calling him.

"Well, is that you, Tièba?"

"Yes, come 'wash your face'; I am 'doing my ablutions'."

This language—that was the good old days, the crazy days when Tièfi and Tièba were regulars of the shabby Blakorodougou bars. They had developed a language worthy of their lifestyle. Men without laws, religion seemed as distant as the village and at times, they didn't hesitate to use holy words to talk about their drinking binge.

"I'm coming at once," Tièfi answered. "I'm going to see Habib for an errand."

"Tièfi, I too am busy. Someone is waiting for me. Come on, we're going to begin the 'bath' together."

Tièfi entered the bar. Tiègbiè followed him. Someone served them each a glass of beer.

"You too ended up leaving Blakorodogou, Tièba?"

"Yes, and to wind up in Fagodougou."

"What are you doing now?"

"Thanks to my daughter, Sara, who is on good terms with the Sub-Prefect, I have a job that tires me little and allows me to have my daily ration of *nansi dji*."

Of course he meant his ration of alcohol.

"Oh!"

"Head-worker of the town. All I have to do is shout from time to time at the workers. That's my entire job. And since these are prisoners they put outside each time to clean the market and dirty areas, I have no qualms about yelling at them."

"Allah is great."

"Yes. But what about you?"

"I returned to the village."

"To Kongodjan! And you manage to work in the field?"

"I took refuge at my older sister's home, Fatouma, and her husband, Mamadou. It is not too honorable to live at my brother-in-law's home. But I needed some peace. And over there, I'm not useless. No, I can't handle the machete too well, but I don't feel useless. And I have peace and quiet.

"I don't recognize you, Tièfi. Is it you who speaks now of peace and quiet? In the old days in Blakorodougou, you were the most unbearable of us all."

"In the old days, it was madness. Yes, the madness of youth. Often, we understand too late. Then, it's an intolerable situation. I shouldn't have returned to the village. I should have stayed over there until the end; I should have had a death that would have resembled my life."

Tièba emptied his glass and made a face that ended with a sigh of satisfaction.

"It's true, we understood too late. With the little money we were earning and considering what things used to cost in Blakorodougou in the old days, we could have built houses over there, even carried out some business . . . Now, we should try not to think. Wine can help. Let's drink. By the way, why are you here in Fagodougou?"

"To buy what's needed for the fasting month, well, to get credit until the coffee crop."

"You too are going to fast?"

"I started it. Well, I'm trying. I can't fast the whole month, but I'm trying."

"*I* can't even try. One day without wine, I really can't. Allah will understand."

Tièfi emptied his glass and got up.

"Thank you for the drink. Now, I have to go see Habib."

"Pass by when you come to Fagodougou. I am the head-worker, or rather, the guard at the jail. Always ask over there. Someone will take you to me."

Tièfi and Tièbgbiè left the bar and walked towards Habib's shop. The man was on his porch, his flat and wide buttocks on his long chair, his potbelly as imposing as Akafu's, catching a breath of air in a simple white sweater. And Habib was smiling, with a shrewd smile that was all too unique. Habib was always pleased with himself. That's hardly surprising. Habib was a force made to conquer, solely to crush. He owned three

big wholesale stores, wholesale-trade stores and two immense general retail stores. On top of that, he owned the only movie theater. He was also one of the big coffee buyers in Fagodougou. His grip on the city did not allow any competition. But like all the wealthy, Habib was insatiable. Money and power are accursed forces that do not give any rest to those who own them. But despite that eternal thirst, Habib always seemed pleased with himself. Perhaps he spoke French poorly, but he was always in the first row at official ceremonies. Besides, the State had rewarded him for his services. One morning, an authority had pinned a medal on his chest. On that occasion, Habib made a speech that, according to the people, was just atrocious, horrible. And Habib was still smiling.

"Mr. Habib," Tièfi said, "we come from Kongodjan on behalf of old Mamadou and Salia. They have sent us to buy what's needed for the fasting month."

"You have the books where I make a note of the debts, well, your credits?"

"Yes, we have the voucher books."

Tièfi got his wallet out, took out the two small books and held them out to the shopkeeper.

"What do you want to take?" the man said, with a smooth voice.

"Two cartons of sugar, two bags of rice and then . . ."

"From the village of Kongodjan, you said?"

"Yes, Kongodjan. Old Mamadou and Salia could not come themselves. They gave us their books. And besides, you know us; we often come here. Anyway, here are our identity cards."

"From the village of Kongodjan! Mamadou and Salia . . ."

The man was still smiling. But his toad eyes, his protruding eyes contracted. A hint of cruelty furrowed some wrinkles on his fat and sweaty forehead. His smile persisted.

"The village of Kongodjan! And the co-op?"

"Which co-op?" Tièfi said.

"Come on now! The one at Kongodjan. You know, the one that was supposed to run out old Habib!"

"True, there was a co-op attempt. But no one said it was aimed against Habib, Kalil, Amara or Kouadio."

"I know what business is all about, my friend. I have known since Bagdad."

"That, that's your job to know what business is like. *We* came for something precise. If you have a grudge against the village of Kongodjan, it's the chief you'll have to see."

"Kongodjan is too small to create problems for Habib. *I* do eat with the Prefect."

Tièfi was hot. The heat, the glass of alcohol, the shopkeeper's words were getting on his nerves. He was used to saying what he thought about everything. But in his younger days, he would speak little: he would hit. In Blakorodougou, what had he not done with his fists? And this toad dared to take up such language with him! He controlled himself because his brother-in-law had greatly advised him not to make a scene in Fagodougou.

"As for me, I served a meal to the President of the Republic and then I knocked out a white man's tooth, a real white man, in those days when the white man still came after Allah."

Habib lost his smile, reddened with anger and almost passed out, then caught himself just in time.

"Scram!" he said. "Let those who have sent you find more intelligent messengers."

Tièfi tightened his arms well up against his sides. Nothing disgusted him as much as these people who thought they were intelligent because they were rich.

"Thank your God for having made you rich. But admit that wealth never made a man intelligent and that poverty is not necessarily a sign of idiocy. Let's go, Tièbgbiè."

But Tièbgbiè was babbling:

"Pardon me, mista Habib, the fasting . . ."

"Let's go, Tièbgbiè."

Tièfi grabbed him by the arm and they found themselves back on the street. Tièfi was sweating. To let oneself be ripped off is one thing; to let oneself be insulted is another. Poverty puts up with humiliation. Who said it ruins one's sense of dignity? Never could Habib realize that he had come so close to death. But *naforo* protects.

Who said *naforo* is nothing?

The taxi braked two meters from Tièfi. Its tires screeched lugubriously on the asphalt and Tièfi knew he had walked in the middle of the road and had nearly gotten himself run over. The taxi driver shouted something at him that he didn't understand. He said nothing. He only noticed that the accident, which had almost taken place, had already brought on a mob and that all kinds of comments were bursting out. They were saying that there were as many drunkards as reckless drivers; that was really the cause of countless accidents under the sad reign of the *blakoros*. Tièfi didn't pay any attention to

the gaping onlookers' remarks. Still followed by Tièbiè, he headed towards Kongodjan's bus-station.

At that moment, the short policeman stopped him.

"Are you the one who is walking in the middle of the road?"

"I decided to cross and I didn't pay attention."

"Say rather that you are drunk, that will be more true."

"I spoke the truth and I beg you to tone down your language. Even in Blakorodougou, policemen speak to people with respect."

"Ah, the gentleman comes from Blakorodougou! Well then, know that I can deal with the drunkard good-for-nothings that Blakorodougou rejects."

The onlookers had gathered around them. Tièfi kept quiet. In the past, in Blakorodougou, he would have simply crushed this skinny cop like one crumples paper. But there is a time for everything. Every age has its reason. Tièfi decided to leave.

"Where are you going?" the young policeman bellowed. "Give me your identity card."

Tièfi plunged his hand into his pocket and got his wallet out again. He opened it and tried to remove the identity card. It wasn't there.

"So, do you have it?" The policeman was growing impatient.

Tièfi remembered.

"I don't see it. I got it out a moment ago at Habib's home. I must have dropped it over there. Let's go there. I'm sure I'm going to find it."

"You're making fun of me? If you don't have it, you'd better give me two thousand francs immediately."

"Two thousand francs? Where do you want me to get them from?"

"If you don't have the two thousand francs, you will sleep in jail tonight."

"Well," Tièfi suggested, "let's wait here. My friend Tièbiè is going to go get it. Go, Tièbiè, we'll wait for you."

Tièbiè left. The policeman and Tièfi were watching each other. The audience, no doubt finding that the scene wasn't exciting enough, began to disperse when "it" happened. The policeman's nightstick beat down on Tièfi's shoulder, then another blow hit him on the ribs. Then, Tièfi retaliated. His head-butt, all at once, threw the policeman into the drainage ditch and the dirty water coated him. At that moment, another policeman suddenly appeared, then another. Tièfi received numerous blows before being driven to the police station.

Two

These very simple people! These people who just want to smile.

And then this disorderly life, this life aimed at a little bit of happiness, but this life riddled with complications springing up from the slightest thing. This life subjected haphazardly to the mood of the powerful.

These men who are humiliated by their own sons.

These cash cows.

These people they milk.

This long exploitation which has followed upon another and which is everlasting.

Let's be afraid to tell the whole truth, wisdom teaches us.

Or else these tired people . . .

There is total darkness in the village. The moon has been afraid to come out, or else it also has its misfortunes to mourn. Darkness! A dreary calm runs through the

concession. Tonight, they didn't eat at old Mamadou's. Silence, swayed by the breeze, hovers over these figures stretched out around the cold hearth. These quiet moments, more eloquent than words, these flattened figures on the ground who are only thoughts and suffering.

"Fatouma, your brother . . ."

"Yes."

"Rumor has it he hit a policeman. They say he threw him into a ditch. And yet, I had warned him. I had certainly told him to keep quiet. And now look where he's at!"

"He's in jail."

Not even a cry. But an indistinct sound burst out of a heart boiling with grief. This terrible word that even comes out of an honest mouth with difficulty. Shame and humiliation! Filth!

"My brother in jail! My mother's child!"

This woman who, all her life, has respected her husband, obeyed her husband's slightest desire so that her children would succeed, this woman who has always prayed to Allah so as never to feel ashamed, and then this great misfortune! This female figure is crushed, tired, on her mat. This woman grown old from exertion and pain, and secretly hoping for a peaceful death and then this misfortune . . .

"What will we do? Oh! What are we to do?"

". . .

"If only we had money! Those people only understand the language of money."

"Hey Allah! In jail!"

"Tomorrow, I'll see about borrowing a little money from Akafu and then I'll go to Fagodougou."

"And what if we saw her?"

"Who's that?"

"The young woman, the headmistress. She will certainly help us. Lassinan told us to see her if we have problems with some of the civil servants."

"This here is man's business, Fatouma."

"They understand each other, Mamadou. And she will help us. She will know how to speak to them, apologize to them. Perhaps they will understand. They will most certainly listen. But with you, they will expect only your money."

"But what will the village say? Letting a woman take care of my problems! No, I'll go tomorrow with God's help."

"May God give us tomorrow!

"May God grant us his help!"

And then, that silence over these figures who are nevertheless lying awake and talking within themselves. Is it true, God, that you wish that some be unfairly subjected to constant humiliation, and that some exist only to live off the efforts of others, to milk the others and humiliate them? Yet this life, so filled with acceptance, self-denial and pain!

Allah above, and then that silence over these figures who will not sleep a wink all night . . . This night is made to stir up so much pain, to reopen so many wounds!

Somewhere, someone is also lying awake. The young woman is reading and

rereading the long letter. She is looking for the hidden power behind each word, she wants to understand this message that is giving new importance to her life.

". . . To be honest, I mistrusted you without even knowing you. It's sad to say that we will always mistrust our young state civil servants. And then, I saw you. I watched you during the first meeting with the villagers and also on the children's recruitment day. I spoke to you and I knew that you could be my partner in this life where it seems I have chosen the most likely path to lose my way.

"You know, Shia—allow me to call you by this name which is already familiar to me—some old people have often told me that we don't choose our religion at twenty without running the risk of shutting ourselves off. They're probably right, but I also believe that at twenty, there are religions we know we'll never choose. That is why already, I struggle, I fight in my way against the paths that I believe are bad.

"In fact, my religion forces me to believe in fate. This idea has been firmly fixed in my mind far too early and if I'm not yet able to reject it systematically, at least I'm certain that everything doesn't amount to divine fatality. That is why I cannot accept the explanation that it's God's sole will that some people be rich and others be poor. I accept rather a "fate" explaining itself by the quasi-scientific exploitation, at any rate organized one by another. It's this fate that we must fight and not divine providence. The two sides are certainly linked, but we can believe in one and fight the other; we can refuse to live in poverty without necessarily being an atheist. Oh, if God amounts only to the acceptance of pain and hardship, and then to the infinite waiting for a happiness so unattainable, I refuse to believe that therein only lies God! Oh, if we had to confuse humility with fear, I refuse to believe that this is God's will!

"I have seen poverty too close and too early on. I have only seen pain. I have lived through it since I was a child in my mother's womb. Above all, I have endured submission. My mother's submission to my father, my parents' submission to the *imams*, civil servants and those who hold the power at all levels, wealthy men of all kinds. Oh, the inexorable dependence, the infernal dependence!

". . . They think that it's Allah's will, if they wade in misery and if others live an opulent life. If it were true that God guaranteed poverty for some and abundance for others, I refuse to believe that this is God, except the god of the most powerful. I have tried to explain all that to my village, I have explained the deception of the powerful and the mistakes of the poor. But people don't understand that, to a certain extent, God leaves us free to assume our destiny.

"But why should I confide to you my ramblings, Shia, if for no other reason than my need for an accomplice? These things weigh too heavily on my heart. And then I really feel my helplessness throughout my entire being, which it is weakening.

"You are there, Shia. You have begun to live with these people, my people, your people too. Soon you will understand their problems and like me, you will understand that we must free them, that these people must free themselves. These people need an education. That, I can clearly see; I can also vaguely make out the difficulties. But these people need to know how to say *no* to the state civil servants' abuse of power, the rich man's extortion and the crimes of false prophets. These people must free themselves of their fear vis-à-vis their own sons. Then, they will educate these ungrateful sons, they will force them to become ethical and honest. We need executives to train the people. You are there. Do your best to help them. If I'm asking you, it's because in spite of our

minimal contact, I believe I know you. *I* am an ungrateful son here, a witness to too many sufferings and nearly escaping the weight of so much uncertainty. Nevertheless, it's providing me with more strength to undertake the struggle. I don't even know anymore if I will continue in this effort.

"Here also, there are things that make you wonder. I'm in the tree nursery and I'm watching the sprouting seeds. The other day, the co-op administrative committee election took place here at the lycée. You should have seen them. They all wanted to be president or general treasurer. To have free access to the cash box. Here are the growing seeds. Terribly disturbing. Here also, there is work to do. But I'm just one seed among many others.

. . .

"Give my greetings to my parents.

"And if you can, help them. Help the whole village."

Lassinan

And on that dreary morning, those who hadn't gotten any rest that night, those who had stayed up, overwhelmed by the weight of suffering and gloom, got up again. And they met again.

The young headmistress entered old Mamadou's concession. Soulé's wife saw her, became flustered and called her husband. He sprung out of his rattan armchair where he had been moping. The young headmistress greeted him; Soulé responded. They made some room for the teacher. Naturally, she sat down.

"And how is your father?" she asked.

"He's in his room. He's getting ready to leave."

"So where is he going?"

"To Fagodougou."

"I have brought news of Lassinan."

"Lassinan? You have seen him? How is he doing? Sali, tell *baba* that the headmistress wants to speak to him."

At that moment, old Mamadou came out of his hut, somber and tense, followed by his wife. They greeted the headmistress while watching her with a questioning and worried look on their faces.

"She brings news of Lassinan," Soulé said.

"You saw him?" Mamadou asked.

"He wrote me. He is well and he greets you."

"Thank you my child. May Allah help you!"

"On my way here, I learned another piece of news."

"Yes, Lassinan's uncle is in Fagodougou and I pray to God that they understand me."

"I'm also going to Fagodougou this morning. Stay here, uncle. I will speak for you. They will certainly understand me better."

"Thank you my child. May Allah bless you! But I have to go myself."

"They will not listen to you. They will ask for one thing only: money. Your struggle against them is a struggle on unequal terms. I'm going to try to help you. Let me help you as if I were Lassinan. I am also your daughter."

They looked at her and a gust of hot air welled up inside them. Let's pray all our sons and our daughters understand that, often, a few words are more comforting than

money! Let's hope they understand that there is only one true luxury: the *mogoya*! And we'll be saved.

"She's right," insisted old Fatouma. "She understands city talk. And she sees just as much as they do. Therefore, they cannot scare her."

"Very well," old Mamadou said. "But I also will go to Fagodougou. That will give me the chance to go shopping for food for the fasting month."

In Fagodougou, things happened very fast, too fast even and old Mamadou didn't have time to really follow the events. The young headmistress went to Habib's home to demand Tièfi's identity card. She threatened to file a police report for theft and assured that this affair was not going to drag on in Fagodougou only. She threatened so much that one of Habib's employees admitted that he had seen it fall. He had taken it and naturally, he would be too pleased to hand it over to its owner as soon as possible.

Shia and old Mamadou were thus able to send the identity card to the police station and the young woman insisted on seeing the police captain. They told her to wait. The big boss, in his well-furnished back office, was probably in the arms of a well-endowed creature. Wretched shame! Finally, they introduced Shia and Mamadou. The little teacher explained why they had come and in her excitement, made it clear that she had dealt with loads of policemen, chiefs and of the top rank.

Mamadou did not have a clue as to what she had said. But he was aware that it was in the process of exploding, that the captain's initial smile had faded away and as the young woman spoke, the man's muscles tensed up even more.

". . . Have you asked yourself once, Chief, only once, what is in fact your role in this country? At any rate, this role is not to spend your time drinking champagne with

other departmental heads, nor to sleep with young girls in your back office, nor certainly to swindle the people—with the help of your policemen—to make payments for luxurious cars or kept women.

"Yesterday, your policemen unfairly locked up here a poor peasant after having beaten him up. You probably haven't been informed about this triviality. Has this man eaten since yesterday? I know it's not your business. By the way, what are the grounds for his arrest?"

The captain, overtaken by the events, was settling himself in his chair as a way to put himself at ease. But Shia was furious. She was speaking a bit fast, but very distinctly.

"Perhaps I am in a bad position to teach you your role, Chief. At any rate, I know one thing. You are supposed to serve these people. Not scare them nor exploit them."

"But you don't know the importance of the identity card . . . ," the fat captain began.

"Yes I know," Shia interrupted. "But your men didn't give him time to show it to them. You want the proof that he was telling the truth when he told you he had lost it at Habib's home, well here it is: his identity card."

"Well, under these conditions . . . I'm going to order his release."

"Do you know what you deserve, Chief?"

"Now I think you're really going too far, Miss . . ."

But Shia kept going, unperturbed.

"You deserve a good lawsuit, you and your cronies. This man who has needlessly been rotting in your dungeon should file a complaint against your abuse of power."

"He laid his hand on a police officer."

"It was the police officer who hit him first and with no sufficient reason. I have witnesses who could back that up. You were hoping for some mandatory tips before releasing this peasant. And he should file a complaint. But you are lucky again. These people aren't ready yet. But it will come. We will particularly make sure that it comes as soon as possible and that the reign of abuse and dishonesty comes to an end."

The chief wouldn't listen anymore. He called a policeman and ordered him to release the "crazy old man" imprisoned the day before.

"All right then, goodbye Miss," he said impatiently.

Mamadou and Shia got up and left. The old man felt a strange warmth inside himself. He hadn't understood a single word the young woman had said to the chief during that rather lengthy talk. But already, in his eyes, the chief had lost something. His name was no longer terribly worrying, evoking an almost supernatural being sprung from the high administration; he was no longer the incarnation of total and abusive domination. He was simply a man a woman addressed without lowering her head. Mamadou looked at the frail, young teacher and wondered what she could have said to the captain. As if she had guessed what he was thinking, she answered him.

"I told him he was not what he thought he was and that when all is said and done, he was less than what he ought to be. And then, I wanted you to understand one thing, father."

"Yes, my child?"

"You who have faith in God, you create other gods on earth. If all these people like to think they are gods, it's because you give them that impression. I don't believe

Allah has required for the believer servile submission to the unscrupulous rich, to the very abusive powerful. I don't believe you find God by humiliating yourselves at the feet of imbeciles. God has also taught man to refuse and I don't believe that refusing is necessarily a sin. I know that this struggle is unequal, but whatever our power may be, we are your sons, your daughters."

"Lassinan always says the same thing too, but how can we fight? Yesterday, Tièfi defended himself. He slept in jail. Without you, I don't know how many days he would have spent there, nor how many francs I would have been forced to slip them into their hands. In the village, Lassinan has always struggled, but he doesn't understand that the proverb says: 'A sincere man buys a good horse to get away when he has told the truth.' So we always have problems. Finding him a way out was quite a chore.

"We are afraid, my child, because we are too vulnerable. You see, one day you will go elsewhere. And the chief or the lowest of his policemen will make me pay for the scene from this morning. How will I be able to defend myself alone? That's why we are even afraid to show ourselves in the company of those who wish us well against the *blakoros*."

"All that will change one day, father. Our brothers will understand one day."

"May Allah hear you, my child."

Tièfi joined them, fully choking with anger. He said that he was not afraid of jail and that he would gladly smash the chief's face in, and even more gladly a *blakoro* policeman.

The return to the village was triumphant. Tièfi had to recount his adventure a thousand times. But for him, that was only a minor incident. Because over there, in

Blakorodougou, he had seen far worse, compared to which what he had just lived through was only a small joke. Even so, it was a triumphant return.

But do people ever triumph? People only pay. Even for their slightest hopes.

Three

Tèrèti was approaching.

The beans on the coffee trees, previously dark-green, were turning green-yellow and were soon going to turn pink. Each peasant had taken precautions. The mats for the drying had already been woven, the sheds built and they had now begun to weed under the bushes. They had to clear the plantation one last time in order to drive away red ants and also to make sure that not too many beans would be lost in the weeds. They had also woven some gigantic *ségués*—balloon-shaped baskets that would be used to preserve the dried coffee before its shucking. Brahima had already asked a mechanic if he could come to repair his old shucking machine that so often broke down.

The fast had arrived before the coffee harvest and people were trying to properly abstain from food before the major work. But fate had it that that year, the fasting month would not get off to a good start. The unspeakable thing blew up right before all their eyes.

It was evening. Everyone had finished eating the millet porridge and they had each begun to make themselves comfortable in order to regain a little strength and commence the main evening prayer. At old Mamadou's home, Tièfi, as usual, was talking about Blakorodougou. The conversation had wound up on the subject of theft.

"In Blakorodougou," Tièfi said, "theft has become a normal thing. People steal. Well, they steal anything, from a simple comb right up to a garment bag. If we didn't pay attention to ourselves, we would have ourselves stolen."

"You don't shut your doors properly," his sister Fatouma said.

"Doors! They go through anything, those people. Through the door and the window, sometimes the roof and even the wall."

"To think that in the past theft was the lowest form of human disgrace! Before," old Mamadou continued, "they would prefer to die rather than steal. Now, it has become a profession. Can't those people do anything else?"

"Over there," Tièfi continued, "it's not like in the village. No really, it's not like here where everyone knows each other, here where it's difficult to suffer from hunger since you always have help from others. They sometimes have nothing to do over there. And sometimes they have nothing, absolutely nothing to eat. And then, going around poorly dressed and hungry in the midst of abundance and luxury, that's how these ideas get into a poor devil's mind . . ."

"And you, Tièfi, have you stolen before?"

Tièfi calmly looked at Soulé.

"No," he finally said. "It's only because I've had a lot of luck. I've always been fortunate enough to find work. Otherwise . . ."

The words hung in silence. Then, Tièfi resumed the conversation:

"If you really look at it, what isn't theft today? The mandatory tips to the schoolmasters, government employees, nurses, etc . . . what do you call all that? The interest rate loans from the rich ones in your village, what do you call that? They say, nothing is free in this world. They would be better off saying nothing is honest. They have legalized theft, that's what it all comes down to. And the biggest thieves are safe from going to jail."

"You are absolutely right," old Mamadou emphasized. "Those are not easy things under the *blakoros'* power. At the hospital or the maternity ward, male and female nurses don't keep it a secret: free medicine no longer exists. There are prescriptions and the pharmacy, but above all, there's the secret purchase of medicine at the nurse's home."

"That only happens to us because we know nothing about their wretched world. We endure. But whom do we complain to?"

"There's also that group of crooks, Habib, Doulaye, Akafu."

"I thought that an *El Hadj* ought to be more human and detach himself more from material goods. To be honest, he surprises me, Doulaye."

"Other people go to the holy city to ask Allah for wealth on earth. Who knows if Doulaye is one of those?"

"Yes, who knows? At any rate, since his return from *Makan*, his business has prospered and, strangely enough, he is becoming more and more cynical, more and more stingy, relentless. He's a show-off. He flamboyantly displays his splendor right before the eyes of the poor, and he relies on them to build up his immense fortune."

"That's why he and Lassinan will never be able to get along. Wealth is a good thing, says Lassinan, but it must not be built on the poverty of others."

There was silence. No doubt, everyone was thinking about Lassinan. There was total silence and that's why yelling could be heard with such force.

The screaming was coming from Assamoi's concession, a poor cattle breeder by trade, but who seemed to know what he wanted in this life. Assamoi, everyone said it, was as insolent as a goat, as perceptive as a trail-sniffing dog. You wouldn't have thought that he had any liking for religions and prophets and it was really a coincidence if

he found himself to be Mori Ba's host. You couldn't even say that he had a certain respect for the old or the rich. One thing was certain. Assamoi was used to saying what he thought about everything. Hence, his friendship with Tièfi. A friendship, let's say, sealed by alcohol. What friendship lasted longer than that one? Hadn't Assamoi dared to support Tièfi during the events which followed the founding of the co-op? Assamoi had made known his need for freedom to whoever was willing to listen to him. What lack of respect goes beyond that one?

Indeed screams were bursting forth, followed by yelling.

"It's coming from Assamoi's home," Soulé claimed.

"Let's go see what's happening," Tièfi said.

"You go, I'm too tired," said old Mamadou.

When Tièfi, Soulé, and Mata, the worker, got to Assamoi's home, nearly the entire village had already gathered there and comments were going nineteen to the dozen. Small puzzling phrases were being said here and there.

"Really, in a henhouse!"

"I'm telling you it's true."

"*Lahi là ha*! Not even somewhere else!"

"And him, again, him, the *waldjou*!"

"Mori Ba in person. Oh! If you had seen him . . ."

"I'm trying to imagine it. The world is upside down."

And little by little, the unspeakable was being pieced together. They began to vaguely understand and the scandal left some people speechless.

"Where's Assamoi now?"

"He's giving his wife a dressing-down."

"And him, the other one, where's he?"

"He took off. Oh, the poor man, he was stark naked!"

"*Lahi là ha*! Stark naked?"

"Without the slightest piece of underwear. Naked as a worm. Had he foreseen such an outcome?"

"Oh, Allah! And on this first day of the month of *Ramadan*!"

Assamoi finally showed up. Right away, there was silence accompanied by questioning looks. Visibly, anger left the man breathless. And since he didn't hide his business, he insisted on satisfying everyone's curiosity. So, he told it all.

One rainy evening, *Assamoi* had welcomed a shady individual wearing sloppy clothes and his scrawny, sly-looking acolyte. Later on, the so-called Mori Ba had claimed to be a great *marabout*, and even something like a saint. Assamoi had soon regretted having shown hospitality to such a charlatan. But he had controlled himself. At the start, Mori Ba had this cowering look that could move anyone. But finally, the man had proclaimed himself *waldjou* and had begun to assume those airs of a haughty and scornful prince. And then, do you know what Mori Ba had offered Assamoi? The *kadiaou*—the scoundrel—had offered to increase his money tenfold, so there. Yes, Mori was asking him for ten thousand francs, which he would turn into one hundred thousand brand new francs just by using some small magic formulas—some *crissis*. Assamoi had made it clear to him that he was not born yesterday, that he had just about had it up to here with the saint *waldjou* and that if he didn't keep quiet, he could drag him before the police who, undoubtedly, would give him some years in jail to increase tenfold!

Assamoi believed the threat had been made sufficiently clear to keep the man quiet. He didn't know him well because that evening . . .

"That evening, I was coming back from hunting. Night had taken me by surprise and I got home late. I thought I would find the *kossiafouè* sleeping off his porridge. But once in the yard, I see no one: neither Mori Ba nor Aya, my wife. I go to the big henhouse to see if it's closed and I find the hens outside on the bush branches, on the roof of the henhouse . . ."

Assamoi had thought it might be a boa and he was quick to look inside the henhouse. He had lit his torch and had looked around. The scene confronted him with an extraordinary intensity. Well finally, he had seen them! She and he, in the henhouse, telling each other something other than holy words.

To be honest, Assamoi did not have a single ounce of respect for his saintliness. He got her out of the henhouse like a dying goat and he beat him black and blue with a stick. The man laid down his dignity and began to scream. At that moment, some people had intervened and had removed Mori Ba from Assamoi's clutches. The *waldjou* hadn't continued the conversation and had squirmed away into the night.

Really, nowadays, *marabouts* make Allah ashamed.

Tièfi tried to calm his friend. Women, of course you couldn't trust them. Because *Tièfi*, who was talking, had rolled around in the hay with women far too much and everyone knows that Blakorodougou women are worse than all the others. Who could believe that *Tièfi* had once "married" a woman who was already married? She would always say that she was going to the village to see her parents; but she was going to live one week with her other husband, one week with Tièfi. And the money that Tièfi

gave her would be used to feed the third thief who, Tièfi found out much later, was literally a dirty *blakoro*, a hippie with no education, a dirty little mechanic certainly uncircumcised and with long hair. Tièfi ended up excusing Assamoi's wife. Under these suns, God alone knows how much *marabouts* and other charlatans can talk up a storm!

When they came to report it all to old Mamadou, he remained pensive and said only that to be honest, *marabouts* nowadays shame Allah. In fact, old Mamadou was thinking about a letter that Lassinan had sent him right after the fall of the co-op. The long letter began as follows:

"Simply shaming Allah means nothing. Shaming Allah by humiliating men, making men feel ashamed, that's what is serious. Serious for God, serious for those whom they humiliate. The foretastes of divine punishment must begin here below. Poverty is too great a torture for you to allow yourself to accept and suffer from it eternally. Humiliation is far too much a burning wound for you to allow yourself to accept it passively . . ."

With this very beginning, Lassinan had disturbed his father and the public letter-writer who had read the letter. Afterwards, the two men had commented for a long time on the letter from the young lycéen. To be honest, the path that Lassinan seemed to be taking—even with some simple hints—worried old Mamadou. Because for him, it was written that Allah made some people rich and others poor. It was written that the Most High watched over men while waiting for the Great Day to punish the miscreants and to reward those who, all their life, have taken the right path, those who have accepted humility and humiliation as well. But Lassinan didn't understand what had been written. And that's what worried old Mamadou. Lassinan wanted to solve everything here, on

earth. And the scary idea had crossed the old man's mind: his son, even if he didn't want to admit it, had set himself up as god. The young man's letter to his father was clear. He criticized him for having given up on the co-op. He made him responsible for the failure of something he had conceived down to the smallest details. As if Allah were not responsible for everything. If the co-op had failed, it's because Allah had wanted it. But, Mamadou thought, Lassinan was often right. The future had again just proven Lassinan right about Mori Ba. Mamadou also remembered one of his rare discussions with his son. Lassinan had said:

"It's not that I don't believe in God. I only question what we make of God. I question the God that rich people rely on to exploit the poor, that powerful people rely on to keep the weak enslaved. That's all!"

"In the past, God was the best defense for the poor, the weak."

"Those were the days when we knew about piety, when we paid homage to humility. Now, humility has become a weakness, and respect, a fear. In any case, saying no to poverty cannot be sacrilege."

Mamadou, virtually defeated, had spoken as if to himself.

"We have accepted for too long. And it has become our way of life to suffer. And to survive, we used to call God witness to the injustice, and we used to think about tomorrow's reward."

"*Baba*, God is perhaps honesty. And honesty, it doesn't just mean not cheating others; it's also refusing that others cheat you."

Mamadou hadn't quite understood his son's last words. But little by little, he understood that these little words were controlling his son's entire behavior. Being

honest towards others and demanding that one be honest towards oneself. The events seemed to prove Lassinan right and Mamadou admitted that it was better to react than suffer.

Yes, Lassinan's letter had been a reproach:

". . . it's because you didn't think about how important the co-op was that the co-op died barely before it got on its feet. And yet, I had explained to you what it was all about. I had told you to unite the strength of numbers with stubbornness in order to resist the power of the rich: beat the rich with their own weapons . . . ."

What exactly had become of the co-op?

The idea had burst forth one morning and had created hope: an imaginary tree whose fruit-scented perfume pervaded the air. The farming civil servants had vaguely spoken about it and Lassinan had been filled with enthusiasm about it. He had finally conceived the thing and had communicated his enthusiasm to the peasants.

The co-op, Lassinan had said, was nothing other than a modern version of the *ton*. The *ton*, as everyone knows, is an aggregate of people from the same profession with the idea of working in a collective manner for the common good. The co-op was supposed to be the union of all the peasants, the coordination of the common effort for the good of all people. Therefore, they had to organize the collective work: going to someone's field today and tomorrow to someone else's field. For a village, that couldn't be too difficult. But they would have to chip in during each coffee crop. The government would probably agree to giving credit to the co-op. Two or three years would be enough for the co-op to become a force. The money chipped in and the government's credit could buy all the village's coffee at the same price. And the profits, instead of going to Habib or another,

would go into the common cash box. Three years would be more than enough for the co-op to become a public force capable of having its own general store and capable of giving credit to the peasants during the fasting months or the new school term periods without resorting to usury. They would no longer need to humble themselves at the rich people's feet to ask them for the price of a bag of sugar or money to buy medicine at the pharmacy. Lassinan's ideas had been convincing. But the young man hadn't taken into consideration those that the co-op made uneasy.

The rich get along with each other. And they are powerful.

The co-op administrative committee was formed after Lassinan's departure. The president was a powerful man, the treasurer had been a rich man. They clearly said it at the time: you can't entrust money into the hands of a poor man. One of the first things they would do would be to dip into the cash box. As if the rich weren't the biggest thieves. Therefore, the chief's nephew, Malan, was appointed president of the co-op; *El Hadj* Doulaye became general treasurer. They took control and they chose as general secretary, Diabaté, a middle-aged man who was very talkative, but who knew how to keep quiet when silence earned him more than well-phrased speeches. Assamoi was able to get himself elected auditor.

The co-op's first collection garnered three hundred thousand francs. But during the fasting month, people noticed that the co-op officers had given the most important loans to those who needed them the least, under the pretext that they were the ones who could pay back what they had borrowed. The people put pressure on Diabaté to have an urgent meeting. He reluctantly complied. At the meeting, they understood his lack of enthusiasm.

Diabaté spoke. "Really, under these accursed suns—who hasn't cursed them?—nothing was in its proper place. Otherwise, would this meeting have had any reason to take place? And even if it were necessary, was it supposed to be held in this way? Serious matters are settled under the palaver tree or at the mosque. But this famous co-op had found a way to confine them in a classroom, like some *blakoros*. Tell me, worthy people, why is that? Because drunkards, people who had never had a penny and who hadn't experienced shame either, and then cuckolds who were good for nothing other than raising fowl and baby goats, these people had thus spread lies and slander trying in this way to tarnish the reputation of men whom Allah himself knows are decent. And people, others, who didn't see any further than the tip of their nose, had accepted such slander."

The brilliant speech failed to exonerate the leaders of the co-op who really found themselves in the position of defendants.

"We were told that the co-op was for helping the poorest people without driving them even more into poverty. But," Salia continued, "during the fasting month, it's us poor people who have the greatest number of problems. Therefore, we should benefit from the co-op."

"Don't you benefit from the co-op in this way?" Malan screamed. "You, Salia, who are speaking, you got two thousand francs."

"We should take our resources into account, which for the moment are low," *El Hadj* Doulaye calmly said.

Salia had already lost his enthusiasm for making accusations. That's when Tièfi, seeing that the meeting might not take place, intervened.

"You have given two thousand francs to Salia, two thousand francs to Brahima…, but how much have you given to Doulaye, to Malan?"

"The same amount," Diabaté shouted.

"Liar! Shameless liar! *I* do drink, *I* am penniless. But I don't lie. I don't sell myself either to *Satana* for money. Your auditor can say in front of the assembly that Doulaye and Malan and the Chief have each gotten seventy-five thousand francs. Those three, they have taken two thirds of the amount available to us. And you, Diabaté, how much have they given you to shut your mouth?"

"Watch what you're saying Tièfi."

"Or else what? Get off your seat and I'll shame you today in front of everybody. You know, *I* have knocked out a white man's tooth."

"Calm down," someone interrupted. "Cool your heads off."

"Tièfi is right," Assamoi said. "These people still want to cheat us, even in the co-op. Let them bring the account books and you will see if I have lied to Tièfi. I'm the auditor and I know there isn't anything in the cash box."

The crowd whispered. But who dared speak? Drawing together the powerful against oneself! Only Tièfi shouted what he was thinking. The rich were aware of the danger that the co-op represented for them. If it expanded, they couldn't keep the people under their control anymore. So all that was just an act of sabotage to keep the poor in poverty and dominate them.

"What we would need," Tièfi explained, "would be a co-op of determined and responsible poor people."

All the peasants knew Tièfi was right. But who had followed him? The rich are powerful and are right.

This had been the last co-op meeting. Surely, that very evening, those who had been a little too talkative and had offended the treasurer or Doulaye, had secretly sent them a little gift and had begged them not to hold it against them later. Only idiots bring together the powerful against them for the public good.

The co-op died "in the making." They didn't even talk about the rest of the funds or the money that some people had to reimburse.

Later on, a good while after the letter to his father, Lassinan had come back on vacation and had spoken about the co-op. He had felt the failure of the enterprise as his own failure. And he hadn't been able to agree with his father.

"The poor are born to fail," old Mamadou had said.

"No," Lassinan had responded. "The poor are born to get out of their condition and to also get all the poor people out of poverty. Do away with poverty. That is what they must want with all their heart and soul."

"Allah has to want it as well."

"Allah wants it. He could not have created man to make of him a damned soul. And besides, if man needs to believe in something, why not believe in happiness through hard work, rather than in his own damnation?"

Old Mamadou had said nothing in response.

Four

Money earned from the coffee harvest is brand new, very crisp, very white. Banknotes have a soothing music that comforts and helps to forget the suffering of which

they are the end result. Coins are brand new and shiny during the crop. Oh, but the road that leads to this money is tortuous and steep!

Still earlier than usual, they ate their breakfast. It was around four o'clock in the morning. Because they were in the month of *Ramadan*, and because they would not eat all day. At dawn, they covered themselves with ashes or some other unsavory powder to protect themselves from the constant bite of red ants which some coffee trees were packed with. And with basket in hand, they gathered precious fruits while whistling love songs or work songs.

> "Beautiful girl, wait for me.
> When I have plenty of money
> I will give you the greatest of dowries
> Be patient, beautiful girl."

Once the basket had been filled, they emptied it into a bag, once the bag had been filled, they immediately carried it to the drying sheds on which they dumped the coffee beans to dry. And they would start all over again. At twelve o'clock, they didn't go home. Since it was the fasting month, it was pointless to waste time. They worked. They had to harvest one to two large bags of coffee a day. They worked without making a big fuss about being tired and hungry.

They went home at sunset. And immediately they "broke the fast," satisfied their hunger and rested. After a quick wash, they took a satisfying gulp of water, then they said the prayer. Next, they tried to drink the millet broth, eat some slices of papaya or pineapple and, stretched out on the bamboo mats, they would realize the weight of their exhaustion. But they still had to go carry out the long prayer, the last one of the night. It was long and exhausting and some old people, already worn out, dozed off standing while the *imam* himself tried not to fall asleep. At that point, they were truly too tired to

think about God. Once the prayer was finished, they immediately went home, they stretched out again on the mats or else, those who could, began eating again.

That was the time when old Mamadou felt a mild sluggishness grab hold of him. His eyes would close, but his mind, not entirely asleep, would listen to the young people's conversation; because, despite the fatigue, they persisted in staying up and chatting in a friendly way, often talking about things which they had already talked about at length some time before.

Mata, the manual laborer, would not stop talking about his return home where the sweet and demure thought of a fiancée, who was hoping for a royal dowry, was waiting for him: the beginning of a marvelous life. Oh, that faraway thought of the girl left at home—because most farming workers came from homelands where coffee is not cultivated—that image was a kind of drug capable of destroying the working man! On that point, Soulé loved to tease Mata.

"Hey Mata, what are you thinking about? Still thinking about the distant Dorman?"

Mata smiled:

"Leave me alone, Soulé, I'm tired. I harvested three large bags today. And then, there are so many red ants in the spot where I was harvesting. There are some kola trees there full of ants that are invading everything around."

"Look here, in spite of everything, you harvested three bags! You are a real champion. But admit that she is the reason why you have so much strength to work. I heard you singing:

"Dorman, you tell me to come back to you
Your memory, Dorman, haunts me night and day

You also call me in a dream, Dorman
But if I do not work
What will I come tell you there, Dorman?
Beautiful Dorman, wait for me
When I have plenty of money
I will give you the greatest of dowries
Sweet Dorman, be patient."

"It's a beautiful song," Tièfi said. "I hope that girl deserves you, Mata."

"If you knew her," Mata began ecstatically . . . "Yesterday, I saw her in a dream. She was calling me. I must go home after the crop. I must have enough money to marry her. At home, a woman is too important. And a man, at a certain age, is disgraced if he has not married."

"So you are only working for her?"

"It's because of her that I left the country to make my fortune. But, all the same, there is my father and my mother. Ah! I will send them—he was trying to remember . . . —a big, blue *boubou* with a golden fringe for my father, three different loincloths for my mother; a hat and a khaki raincoat for my uncle."

He paused. He had an uneasy look on his face: the dream made him lose track of reality.

"For myself, a bike and then many other things. For Dorman, all that a woman could desire. Of course, I will put the dowry money aside, and then . . ."

"But Mata, in that case, you will never go home."

Tièfi was a dream wrecker. Real life, *he* had banged his head against it. He had felt it from all sides and was unaffected. Any love in search of ideal happiness left him sarcastic, even bitter. Did a woman deserve someone who sacrifices so much for her? *Tièfi* would have answered no. But perhaps he had met in his life only the worst kind of women.

"You think," Mata said, "that if I work hard, I will not be able to do all that? I hope the money I will have will be enough."

Old Mamadou said nothing. However, he was also thinking of the money from the crop. An illusion, simply! One had always spent it all before putting it in one's pocket. So that it immediately passed on to other hands. Then all projects were put on hold for another year. And that silent obsession tormented Mamadou. Going to the holy city, to *Makan*, seeking salvation for his entire family. Not assuming a pompous title like *El Hadj* and with an Arab veil, but leaving with all his sincerity to ask the Most High to open the doors of paradise to each member of his family. Yes, for this world, it was over. He could no longer wait for happiness in a world that had become terribly hostile, a world where honesty had become nonsense and where of necessity you had to drown someone to get out of it. Certainly, he tried to follow as accurately as possible the commandments of *Islam*. He conscientiously said his prayer although he only knew very few *suras* of the holy *Coran*. He gave alms as much as his means allowed him. He also fasted. But the most serious problem had to do with the holy city. How would he get there! By foot, it would take years. And who would take care of the family? He absolutely needed money. My goodness, if going to heaven also required money, that would be the end of all hope. Paradise too, opened solely to the rich. Allah can't accept that. He is great and just and merciful. And he knows. May Allah forgive us and help us! *Amina*.

"I hope you can fulfill your dreams, Mata. I really hope so," Tièfi said in a tone of voice that made you wonder.

"And you, Soulé, what will you do after the crop?"

Soulé slipped his father a comical look. He too had been haunted by an obsession. A sewing machine. Certainly, he hadn't understood much about sewing, but he could sew some pants and certain kinds of shirts. And with the machine, he would improve, perhaps. Often, he would see himself as master tailor in his workshop with his apprentices calling him "boss." But after each crop, family problems did not allow him to buy that machine.

"They will perhaps buy me the machine," Soulé replied. "No doubt, this crop will be the good one."

Old Mamadou tried not to listen to his eldest son. To be honest, Soulé aggravated his father. He was like no one in the family. Always in a happy mood, he seemed not to worry too much in a life that was worrying everyone else. But what was even worse, Soulé was a lazy individual, a good for nothing. It was the worst thing that could happen to Mamadou, he who practically worshipped work. But can one choose his offspring? Fate, yes fate! Why then did Lassinan reject fate? Why did he think he could untangle the problems that Allah himself had woven according to his will? One does not choose his life. It had been written and *marabouts* had often repeated it. Refusing to accept poverty and insults, Lassinan had said. And now, the young headmistress was saying the same thing. But can one rebel against destiny? Lassinan had also said that destiny was an invention of those who wanted to dominate the poor. Well, Lassinan was in contradiction with . . . Mamadou no longer dared continue his reasoning. No, Lassinan loved Allah and he prayed normally. Only, he said that some, more clever people, used religion to exploit the poor. Mori Ba for example . . .

"*Assalam alékoum.*"

"*Alékoum salam.* Sit down, Yacouba."

Yacouba sat down. They offered him the ritual water. He took a few sips. Intrigued by that late night arrival, they immediately asked if there was anything new in Fagodougou. Yacouba gave the news. He ended with the most important bit.

"Bakary told me that Issa is sick and to give you the message."

"Is it serious?" Old Fatouma was getting worried.

"Bakary didn't give me details."

Immediately, there was a hush. Worries. Issa, sick and over there! Certainly, Bakary's wife is good-hearted, but she is old and very busy. Was Issa getting the proper care and attention? Allah, protect the orphan who is over there, caught up in a life where he's nothing more than a small ant. Allah, help us! *Amina.*

"Tomorrow," old Mamadou said to Soulé, "you will go to Fagodougou and see your little brother. You will need a little money in case there is talk of buying medicine at the pharmacy. I only have a thousand francs."

"A thousand francs . . . transportation and then the cost of the medicine."

"I know, Soulé. But it's too late tonight to grind the little amount of dry coffee we have. Tomorrow morning, you will leave early to see what's going on. Meanwhile, we will grind the dry coffee and in case you should need to buy medicine, come back and get the ground coffee."

When Soulé arrived the following day at Bakary's yard in Fagodougou, he knew from the way they were looking at him that Issa's sickness had to be serious.

"It began only two days ago," Bakary said, overwhelmed. "First, he told us that he had a headache. That evening, he did not eat. The following day, it was yesterday, he

could no longer get out of bed. He says that his entire body is aching, especially the joints. Well my wife told me that it had to be *djakouôdjo*—malaria. So we called an old friend who knows the cure for *djakouôdjo*. That's the treatment we have been following since yesterday."

"Has there been an improvement?"

"We can't tell . . ."

Soulé went to Issa's bedside.

The child, lying on a bambou mat, wrapped in a thick wool blanket, was sweating and shivering with cold. His yellowed eyes vaguely stared at his big brother. Soulé's hand rested on the child's forehead. His body was very hot and damp with sweat. However, Issa was cold.

"Issa," Soulé called, "Issa . . ."

"I'm cold . . ., I'm cold," the child answered.

His sick and empty eyes fixed a vague and desperate look on his helpless big brother.

"I'm going to send him to the hospital," Soulé said to Bakary.

"I would have already done so, but the white man's medicine is ineffective against *djakouôdjo*. That's why I chose our own medicines."

"You're right, but we have to send him to the hospital. That could just as well not be *djakouôdjo*."

"Fine. We'll take him to the hospital."

The child was in bad shape. Soulé saw it. He felt that pain of this little frail body that no one else could suffer for another person. Such is illness. Death also. What do

you do when faced with a sick person? Treat him, above all give him all the care and attention that you can. And pray. Allah, save this child who has not even lived, this child who has up until now only benefited from his family's poverty. My God, make it so that this child lives, grows up, gets his family out of poverty, works for his country, to do away with the poverty of the world. *Amina.*

The white doctor examined the child, made a long face, spoke in French and wrote on a bit of paper. Finally, he held out the prescription for Soulé. The black male nurse translated.

"He wonders why you didn't come earlier to the hospital. At any rate, he says to quickly buy the medicine."

"How much could all that cost?" Soulé asked with a worried look.

"It costs a lot," the nurse said. "Yes, a lot. Only . . ."

Soulé was waiting for the rest of the sentence. *Bakary* had already understood.

"How much?" Bakary said.

"I could give it to you for a good price. And God knows how expensive it is. At the pharmacy, you will get it for four thousand francs."

"What kind of a bargain can you give us? The child is really sick and if you help us, Allah will repay you some day. You know, we are poor and the coffee crop hasn't quite come yet, but the child . . .

"Disease never waits until we are ready for it," Bakary continued. "Is that a reason to die because we are poor? Help us, son."

"Three thousand francs."

"Three thousand francs," Bakary said, "is little in comparison with a person's life. However, for people like us, it's a lot. Where can we get that amount right away?"

"In any event, you'll have to manage on your own," the nurse said. "*I* only wanted to do you some good. But I can't risk my job for nothing."

"Give the medication," Soulé said. "Pardon me, take care of the child. I still have seven hundred francs. I will return to the village immediately. Tomorrow, I will send you the rest, five thousand francs if you want. In the name of Allah, tomorrow I will come back with five thousand francs."

"No," the nurse interrupted. "Go instead to the pharmacy and you will see if they will give you the medicine on credit."

Soulé's look went from the nurse to the bed where Issa was lying. The child was gasping for air, rambling. His entire little body was raking with tremors which the wool blanket revealed.

God, save this little human being who lies on this bed. The black nurse, calm and serene at this little boy's bedside, thinks only about three thousand francs that he will perhaps give to a streetwalker. Oh, these terrible times!

"Money is nothing, my son," Bakary resumed addressing the nurse. "I am a tailor in town, you know me . . . Take care of the child and if by tomorrow, we don't pay, report me to the police. In the name of Allah, we will pay. But we don't have any cash on hand. Look at Allah, my son, and give us the medication."

The man said nothing, but his eyes wandered over towards the two men, rigid. Then a female nurse came in and began to talk to him:

"The doctor is looking for you, Paul. Good Lord, what are you doing here?"

The male nurse turned around and, on his way out, said to Bakary and Soulé who were looking at him imploringly:

"The child is very sick. Quickly bring the medication."

He left, followed by the female nurse.

Helpless, Soulé watched them leave. He didn't realize that he was crying.

It wasn't possible for Soulé to hang around in Fagodougou to try to borrow some money. With Habib, the contract was crystal-clear: buying goods on credit during the fasting month or difficult times then, during the crop, selling his coffee to Habib who would deduct his share before handing over the rest to the planter. Today, Habib would refuse to give any money. That wasn't in the contract. Who then, in Fagodougou, could save Soulé? No one. Bakary wanted to with all his heart, but he was poor and worn out like an old chipped plate. Certainly, he had had friends in the past, when he was worthwhile. That is to say, when he was rich. But now, who would be willing to lend something to the old tailor? Everyone knew that money lent to Bakary was money given to God, or lost. Like money given to a beggar.

"I'm returning to the village. *Baba* had told me that he would grind the dry coffee today. I'm returning to get the ground, sorted out coffee. I will sell it here. Tomorrow, I will perhaps be able to buy the medication."

"You'll have to hurry," Bakary said. "Meanwhile, I'll stay at the child's bedside. But, you have to hurry."

"I'm leaving. Tomorrow, I'll be here very early."

"May Allah accompany you."

Soulé reached the village very late. The sun had gone down. The dry coffee had been ground and already sorted out. They had a total of about sixty kilograms. It wasn't heavy though. Seven thousand francs. Anyway, it was enough. But Soulé was exhausted and his fatigue was obvious. However, he would have certainly liked to put on another face, a reassuring face to talk to his father and his mother. It wasn't possible.

He was bombarded with questions. And he couldn't answer them all without telling the truth, without admitting that the child was between life and death. And then, that look on his father's face, that inconceivable look on old Mamadou's face with a slight trembling of his eyelashes:

"You've seen him?

"How's he doing?

"Don't hide anything from us, tell us the truth. Is it really serious?"

"It's *djakouôdjo*. It's serious enough, but the doctor said that it's nothing, that it was going to pass. We have to quickly send the medication."

"I heard Whites don't know anything about *djakouôdjo*. So . . ."

"That's not true. The hospital was able to heal Assamoi last year, otherwise . . . And besides, who can still trust charlatans nowadays? The true healers, those who spoke to the genies, have disappeared with the coming of the *blakoros*. The others remain now, Mori Ba and . . ."

"Oh no, don't talk about that *allahdjougou*—that enemy of Allah, here!"

Then silence. That heavy, agonizing silence. Night came, even more silent. And darkness weighed so heavily on the frail shoulders of the mother all but overcome by anxiety.

"Soulé, your little brother?"

"He is really sick, *Nan*. But the doctor said that he was going to recover, and that we should quickly bring the medicine."

"Tomorrow," old Mamadou interrupted, "we will go together to buy the medicine. Yes, I am coming with you, Soulé. I have to see him."

"*Baba*?"

"Yes . . ."

"You have not tried to see the path, you have not tried to see clearly?"

"Yes, of course I have. I went to the neighboring village and I saw Mouroulaye. He seems to be a serious *marabout*. He told me the illness is serious, but that if I made the sacrifices he showed me, it would be okay. I have already made the sacrifices."

"Tomorrow, we will leave."

"Perhaps I could also come," Tièfi said.

"What would be the point of us all going, Tièfi? We would be wasting money; now we need money to buy the medication."

"May Allah give us tomorrow!"

"*Amina*."

And the next day, on the dreary morning, before old Mamadou and Soulé could even go to the station to catch the truck for Fagodougou, the messenger had arrived on his bike. With his head low, the man had reported the news he had received from Bakary.

"*Dé banan*—the child is gone."

And the unbelievable cry burst out of Soulé's chest:

"He is dead!"

Five

Oh! That long awaited crop, that crop that was to erase some financial worries, it put tears in our eyes. Here, we still know that money can't replace the man, but that money easily costs man his life. Money is nothing. We made a relentless god of it.

We harvested the last bean of coffee, with tears in our eyes. We dried, ground, and sold it unenthusiastically. To make sure we earned enough to repay all the debts.

Old Mamadou no longer took an interest in work. Ever since the messenger had brought the fatal news, it was like something had been crushed in him. Certainly, he had seen dead people in his lifetime. But, this one here was different. In the past, he had attributed everything to God. This time, he wondered if the child would have died if Soulé could have bought the medicine in time. The episode with the young male nurse stunned him even more. Responsibility for this death fell especially on human beings who could have done something, yet had done nothing. And, only afterward, God's responsibility. Oh, money! The crop only helped to repay debts. They paid their share to Habib, they paid Akafu too. They repaid small debts here and there. They saved twenty thousand francs for the fortieth day sacrifice of Issa's death. There was only five thousand francs left when the two workers, Mata and Drissa, got their share. All of a sudden, all the projects were falling apart; the dream was turning into a nightmare. The trip to the holy city, Soulé's machine . . . Dreams! They didn't even think about them anymore. Five thousand francs! The fruit of so much hard work! For the following school year, they were going to have to run around everywhere to still find money, and then during the fasting month, face Habib. Again. A vicious cycle where only prayer could at times give some peace of mind.

On the fortieth day sacrifice, they said the prayer for the dead. Lassinan had come. He participated in everything. They recited on the prayer beads long verses from the Book and then the *imam*—the prayer leader—spoke for a long time:

"*Allah yi hinan dé nan*! May Allah grant rest to the child, may Allah make the ground light on him!"

"*Amina*," the audience had whispered.

The raging man had continued:

"To be honest, what is a life worth? Oh! What is our breathing worth? Nothing. The world is a test to reach true life: paradise. We are passing through, and enduring poverty is the only way to reach paradise, beyond. Those who go are happier than those of us who stay. Therefore, there is no place for tears."

Of course . . .

We have to bear life like a heavy burden. Yes. It's through this penance here that we will find salvation tomorrow. What matters is prayer and acceptance. And old people's duty is to watch over their children, to prevent them from losing control in ballrooms and forgetting God. For tomorrow, it was going to heat up, worse, burn . . . The *imam* was just about to give a realistic description of hell. But Lassinan had asked to speak.

And then, what had he said?

He did not deny God's existence, but he could not accept that God recommended us to suffer on earth and take pleasure some place later. Man's poverty can't be a gift from God, but the will of well-to-do men, eager to increase their fortune more and more. Those who sing that life is nothing, that poverty is good, *they* are rich, and they cling to

life and their privileges. Death relates to God, but also relates to poverty. Everyone dies, but the poor die more easily.

"Why is my brother dead? It's Allah who wished it, you'll tell me. I'll say that it's mainly because he was from a poor family. And then, if his family is poor, it's because it's more convenient for some other people that they are poor."

The audience was moved by the young lycéen's words. Someone had tried to protest. One does not speak in this way during a sacrifice. But the man had held back his protest in front of Lassinan who, with a serious look on his face, went on speaking.

"You keep saying that the important thing is paradise, and that money is nothing. But who among you all hates money? Which one of you refuses earth's material well-being? You'd rather pocket your bills in your old wallets rather than lending them to a friend in trouble. Whom do you think in this village is a good Muslim? The rich, those who can afford being *Hadj* just to come back later to show off in front of others.

"You did everything to bring down the co-op, to continue exploiting the poor peasants. If the co-op existed, my brother would not be dead. No, people, he would not be dead because the co-op would have easily lent the money to my father. You destroyed the co-op so that someone would continue to bow down to you. You know that people need to believe in something. In your interest, you, the rich who are looking at me, you push them to believe in a sad fate, damnation. The poor must also believe in happiness, the chance of happiness.

"I will help them as long as I live."

El Hadj Doulaye, overtaken by what had happened, was shrinking in his corner, trying not to draw any attention to himself. Diabaté, with his eyes lowered, seemed to be

sleeping. Old Mamadou himself seemed to be swimming in a disaster against which he could do nothing. Only Tièfi felt comfortable. He approved of his nephew. Whatever their hatred or their admiration was that day, people understood that Lassinan was no longer a mysterious child, but a threat to their money or a guarantor of security.

"*Allah yi hinan ndogo là*," Lassinan concluded.

Yes, may God grant rest to the child! At any rate, it was as if the ceremony had been cut short. They were spared long speeches from some people who usually spoke of death as if they had died once already; people who described hell as if they had already made a trip there.

When everyone had left, having taken kola nuts, fritters and other things with them, Lassinan revealed his decision to his father.

"I have decided not to go back to school anymore, *baba*. I would have liked to go further, but what's the use! One day, you would die in my absence and that would not be good. Therefore, my place is next to you, to help you finish the rest of your days peacefully, to comfort my mother a little, and to try to help the whole village."

"I am tired. Your mother too, Lassinan. And if you stayed, that would help us."

"I wanted to go further to be able to help you out even more. But I think I need to begin to do the little that I am capable of. As for the rest, there is hope. There's Abou who will grow up. And I will do my best to make sure he succeeds. As for me, I made a request and it was accepted. When classes begin next term, I will come to teach here."

"That will help us, Lassinan."

"It will be hard, *baba*. Because I'm not only coming to teach the children. I'm also coming to fight the perpetual exploitation of the people. It will be hard, for the rich

are powerful and they understand each other. But when you have understood, you too, that you are not made to live in poverty, that your misery does not only come from Allah, then you will understand your strength. It will be hard, but I will have your blessings, and also Shia's support and her gentleness."

"She has a good heart, this girl."

"Yes. And we will fight together. Against the corrupt civil servants who have no ethics, against the wealthy who exploit you."

"You are going to make many enemies, Lassinan. And then those for whom you are going to sacrifice yourself will not show you any gratitude."

"It's true, *baba*. But this is nothing. We don't want their gratitude. We are going to start by reorganizing the co-op."

"*Allah yi a dè mbè*! May Allah help you!"

"*Amina*."

Cocody, December 1972

GLOSSARY

A ma kè djougou manyé (Dyula): "It's nothing serious."[58]

abokis (Hausa): coffee salesmen. They are often of Nigerian nationality.

adjossi (Dyula): grease their palm.

Alihamdoulilahi (Arabic): "Thank God."

Allah (Arabic): God. He is the supreme being worshipped by the Muslims.[59]

Allah ka nan en malo (Arabic): "May Allah not hold us in contempt; Allah protect us from shame."

Allah yi en dè mbè (Malinke): "May God help us."

Allah yi hèrè kè en yé (Dyula): "May God shower us with his blessings."

Allah yi hinan dé nan (Dyula): "May Allah grant rest to the child."

allahdjougou (Dyula): Allah's enemy.

Allaho akbar (Arabic): "God is most great."

Amina (Arabic): Amen.

Assalam alékoum (Arabic): "Peace be upon you." The Muslim greeting of peace. *Alékoum salam* is the response.

azan (Arabic): prayer call.

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[58] I wish to acknowledge the friendly assistance of Amadou Koné with the glossary. He helped by supplying me with definitions for additional foreign words found in the text. In addition, he also supplied me with a reference to the different languages for the foreign words in the glossary. Definitions for certain Arabic words such as *Allah*, *El Hadj*, *fatiha*, *Islam*, *marabout*, *Mecca*, *muezzin*, *Ramadan*, and *sura*, were taken form Neal Robinson's Islam (Richmond: Curzon, 1999).

[59] Etymologically, the name "Allah" is an abbreviation of the Arabic *al-ilah*, which simply means, "the God". According to Neal Robinson, the Koran declares that "He is One and has neither associates nor offspring. The various names which the Quran ascribes to Allah stress not only His unity, but also His eternity ('First', 'Last', 'Heir', 'Living'); His perfection ('Self-sufficient', 'Worthy of all praise'); His omnipotence ('All-mighty', 'All-powerful'); His omniscience ('All-knowing', 'All-wise', 'All-seeing', 'All-hearing', 'Totally-aware'); His reliability ('Patron', 'Trustee'); His beneficence ('All-merciful', 'All-pitying', 'Benevolent'); and His indulgence ('All-forgiving', 'Oft-relenting')" (76).

baba (Dyula): daddy.

balafon (Malinke): wooden xylophone.

bangui (Malinke): palm wine.

béléké (Dyula): plantain or boiled cassava.

blakoro (Dyula): a young boy who has not been initiated. He is not capable of speaking before an audience, nor does he have the right to do so.

blakoroya (Malinke): describes the behavior of a "blakoro," a behavior not centered around human interests or values.

boubou (Malinke): voluminous dress worn as an outer garment by men and women.

conogoli (Anyi): insect that gets drunk all day long on palm wine.

Coran (Arabic): Koran, the Muslim holy book containing the orthodox doctrines of Islam.[60]

crissis (Dyula): small magic formulas.

dé banan (Dyula): "The child is dead."

dékissès (Dyula): a good child who is determined to succeed.

Dioulabougou (Dyula): the Dioula area.

Djakouôdjo (Anyi): malaria.

djoussou kassi (Dyula): a son's despair.

Dô di (Dyula): "What's up?"

El Hadj (Arabic): a title given to a man who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. The pilgrimage, or hadj, to Mecca takes place in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. All Muslims must make this journey once in a lifetime if they are physically able and can afford to do so.

fatiha (Arabic): first sura of the Koran containing the profession of faith.

gnansouman (Dyula): tranquility.

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[60] The Arabic name *Qu'an*, means "The Recital." The Koran, for Muslims, "is the infallible Word of God, a transcript of a tablet preserved in heaven, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel." N. J. Dawood, Trans., The Koran (London: Penguin Books, 1997) 1.

haramou (Dyula): fraud, its fruit and the sin that accompanies them.

I hèkè to (Dyula): "Pardon me my son."

I nan oulafè (Dyula): "Come back this evening."

imam (Arabic): prayer leader.

Islam (Arabic): the religious faith of Muslims including belief in Allah as the sole deity and in Muhammad as his prophet.

kadiaou (Anyi): a scoundrel.

karamoko dé (Dyula): beginners; a child who is learning the Koran.

koro (Dyula): older brother.

kossiafouè (Anyi): a hooligan.

lahi là ha (Arabic): surprise exclamation used when there is a drama.

Makan (Dyula): Mecca, a city in Saudi Arabia, birthplace of the prophet, Muhammad, and holy city of Islam.

marabout (French, from the Arabic *al-murabitun*): Muslim holy man, healer, and teacher said to have supernatural powers.

mogoya (Malinke): a great respect for human relationships.

muezzin (Arabic): Muslim singer who calls the faithful to prayer five times daily from the minaret of a mosque. The devout stop whatever they are doing and face Mecca to kneel and pray.

naforo (Dyula): money.

nan (Dyula): mother.

nansi dji (Dyula): a magic potion.

ninguin ninguin (Dyula): stories not at all clear, mandatory tips to employees.

péré (Dyula): a load of thirty kilograms.

Peul (Fulani): a predominantly pastoral ethnic group found throughout West Africa; also known as Fulani.

Ramadan (Arabic): the name of the ninth month in the lunar Islamic calendar, the month in which the Koran was revealed to Muhammad. Believers must obey, for the whole month, a rigorous fast forsaking all forms of consumption between sunrise and sundown, this includes food, drink, cigarettes, and any form of sexual contact.

Satana (Arabic): Satan.

ségués (Dyula): balloon-shaped baskets.

soulamaya (Dyula): solidarity between believers.

sura (Arabic): a chapter of the Koran.

tèrèti (Dyula): coffee crop.

ton (Dyula) : an aggregate of people from the same profession with the idea of working in a collective manner for the common good.

waldjou (Dyula): a saint.

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Dana Martin grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana where she graduated from Ursuline Academy High School in 1992. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in French from Tulane University in 1996. After graduating from the university, she attended the French Language School at Middlebury College in Vermont. There, she began her advanced studies in French and prepared for the language school's overseas program in Paris, France; she lived and studied in Paris for the 1996-1997 academic school year. In 1997, she received her Master of Arts in French. She then began doctoral studies at the University of Florida, where she also worked as a teaching assistant, and completed her qualifying examinations in the fall of 2000.

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